

Dirt & Domesticity

Constructions of the Feminine

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Dirt & Domesticity

was organized by the following Helena Rubinstein Fellows in the 1991–92 Whitney Museum Independent Study Program

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COVER: Charles J. Van Schaick Seven Maids: Black River Falls, Wisconsin, c. 1890 Constructions of the Feminine

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Ann Hamilton, still life, 1988

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Preface

"Dirt and Domesticity: Constructions of the Feminine" began with research into documentary photographs and advertisements from the first half of the century. Femininity seemed to be defined in terms of how women managed dirt. Women who had servants to deal with dirt were perceived to be more feminine, more ladylike. As a result, the negative, "unfeminine" connotations of dirt had to be absorbed by the body of the servant. Representations of servants tended either to desexualize them or to position them as functional accessories within the domestic environment, as if to repress the threat inherent in contact with dirt.

During and immediately after World War II, a hegemonic model of femininity developed in the United States: the middle-class, white housewife so familiar from popular culture of the 1950s. Human servants were now replaced by mechanical and electrical appliances, chemical cleaning agents, and prepared, pre-packaged food. In the most extreme idealizations, the housewife orchestrated a team of inorganic servants, so-called labor-saving devices, which symbolically — if not actually — removed her from contact with dirt (so she would always be "clean" for her husband). The contradictions within this model are revealed by the critical irony of Toby Lee Greenberg's work, such as *Accept This Fact* (1987), which mismatches representations of the ideal with instructions on how to achieve it. In Greenberg's piece, it is quite clear that dirt never goes away; it just has to be hidden from the men.

The different ways in which dirt has been negotiated suggest hierarchical distinctions within definitions of femininity. The symbolic relations between dirt and the body of the servant become crucial when we consider how class and race privilege are built into concepts of cleanliness (and beauty, a corollary, as Lorna Simpson's *C-ration 1991* suggests).

The exhibition examines the multiple forms of patriarchal oppression by looking at representations of single women, married women, women of color, and working-class and wealthy women.

"Dirt and Domesticity" includes historical and contemporary documentary and "post-documentary" photography, advertisements, video and three-dimensional art. The variety of work allows the exhibition to examine the appearance and disappearance of dirt in a range of discourses. Perhaps the foremost of these is the discourse of documentary photography itself. The "natural" form for representations of the socially "low" and hence dirty, documentary's frequent though not uniform failures to do more than reiterate class and race relations are one point of departure for work by Danielle Gustafson, Martha Rosler, Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, and Pat Ward Williams. There is movement within the exhibition between more or less reflexive modes of documentation, or deliberately falsified, fictionalized documentation, and work which in various ways takes dirt upon itself, enacts dirtiness in order to reveal its workings and its possible transgressive value.

In the catalogue, Frazer Ward's essay, Foreign and Familiar Bodies, examines dirt as it appears in the documentary tradition and some of its successors, and traces relations between some contemporary and modernist practices, articulated in terms of the transgressive potential of the "abject" and of hybridity. Kate Haug's essay, Myth and Matriarchy: An Analysis of the Mammy Stereotype, analyzes the role and persistence of the "mammy," an ideological figure crucial to the maintenance of a historically prevalent idealization of femininity and of a particular set of exploitative domestic arrangements. Cara Mertes' There's No Place Like Home: Women and Domestic Labor provides a broad historical context, examining the social conditions which have made possible the enforcement — largely by a process of naturalization — of the connections between women and domestic labor.

Jesús Fuenmayor Kate Haug Frazer Ward

Foreign and Familiar Bodies

Frazer Ward

Until recently, twentieth-century visual culture has left the dirt arising in the specifically feminine domestic sphere to be dealt with by documentary photographers, with salutary exceptions, among them Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp's *Elevage de Poussière (Dust Breeding)* of 1920. The ashtrays in still lifes have been empty, the glasses full; Pop Art's appliances were gleaming icons of industrial production and consumption. It is as if artistic labor were itself a form of cleaning, or at least repressed the necessity of it, despite the time that most of us, even artists, spend on maintenance, cleaning up paint, doing the dishes. It is, however, in the nature of dirt to be cleaned up. This essay examines the structures and effects of the appearance and disappearance of dirt, or its repression and return, in a series of historical and contemporary exemplars of cultural practice.

"Dirt and Domesticity: Constructions of the Feminine" presents dirt in the three important ways it functions in the social and cultural construction of femininity. The first of these is a documentary tradition in which dirt is associated with femininity itself and the socially "low." Dirt here becomes a sign of class relations. The second involves contemporary art, considered in relation to a particular modernist avant–garde tradition; this contemporary work deals with specific kinds of dirt which may be referred to, following Julia Kristeva, as "abject." Abjection poses, or may be made to pose, a threat to repressive social and symbolic systems. In the third category, dirt is rarely visible in obvious ways, but resurfaces in works that might be described as hybrids, as they displace materials from familiar contexts. Through this formal messiness, dirt can be seen as a positive element within critical art practices. Ultimately, what may be most interesting about dirt of various kinds is the ways in which it reveals both social difference and heterogeneity.

Dirt and Documentary

The concept of "dirty," like other emotionally significant abstractions with which it is connected — sex, birth, nourishment, death — has a history inextricably linked with changes in family life, in cultural representations of bodies and regulation of sex, and in organization of work.

- Phyllis Palmer.

The anthropologist Mary Douglas, surveying "primitive" ritual pollution behavior, debunked contrasts based on progressivist notions of hygiene, arguing instead that "there is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder." ² The more closely we examine not only primitive pollution but our own ideas about dirt, the clearer it becomes that these ideas symbolize social relations. ³ Douglas argues that "if we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place." ⁴ This definition, in turn, implies

a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order....Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism....⁵

The examples of symbolic dirtiness Douglas gives are commonplace, domestic, highlighting the mundanity that may disguise dirt's importance: food is not dirty, but scraps left on plates or smears on clothes are; shoes are not dirty except on the dinner table; clothes are not messy except on the floor, and so on.

Phyllis Palmer succinctly sums up the effects of such everyday symbolization: "Dirt is not a scientific fact but a principal means to arrange cultures." For Douglas and Palmer, a fundamental cultural arrangement is the organization of gender relations. Palmer argues that in the United States, the middle-class white housewife, the historically dominant model of femininity, has been constructed around domestic cleanliness:

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The home has been reified as the setting for good women, virtuous wives and mothers. Its work has been haloed with maternal imagery. Yet the work carried on in the home is unconsciously identified with dirt and decay, which threaten to taint the character of the woman who does it. ⁸

What is striking about even this dominant classification is how contingent it seems, how menaced, as though femininity had been defined as "naturally" tending toward dirtiness (and as if domesticity depended on resisting it). Hence Palmer's observation, that "sex, dirt, housework, and badness in women are linked in Western unconsciousnesses...." Ideals of domesticated femininity like the middle-class housewife function to contain that natural tendency, which is held at bay by the facts of economic domination: historically, the housewife's reliance on her husband's income meant that she was able to pay working-class women to dirty themselves for her; later, these other women would be replaced, in part, by appliances and commodities. Indeed, a history of femininities might be a catalogue of cleaning agents.

Dorothea Lange's drab, beautiful mother and children, Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California (1936), is perhaps the most familiar exemplar of a major documentary tradition in which domestic dirt has been represented in connection with the socially "low." This traditon makes perfect sense: class relations displace dirt downward, so that it "naturally" represents the lower boundaries of culture. Douglas, it should be noted, insists that there is unsettling power in the marginal and unstructured areas outside the boundaries of systems. 10 Her explanation of modern dirt avoidance as based in part on aesthetic considerations suggests that relations between the classifications "aesthetic" and "dirty" are unstable, 11 as dirt exerts pressure along the borders of the aesthetic. Similarly, Palmer's work implies that the threat of dirtiness is structural even to the most extreme idealizations of femininity. Speculatively, it may be more than mere coincidence that in some quarters photography continues to be regarded as a servant to art, and that relatively many noteworthy documentarists have been women. It may also follow that if dirt represents what is marginal



Dorothea Lange, Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California, 1936

to the dominant culture, this documentary tradition should have taken its place, at least initially, in the margins of art.

Migrant Mother is exemplary in this context because of its centripetal movement, over the years, from the boundary toward the center of art. From its original place in a file drawer in the Historical Section of the Farm Security Administration, where Lange was working, it moved through countless reproductions — more than any other photograph 12 into the museum. It is still, of course, in the photography collection, for the history of cultural categories is decipherable in institutional and bureaucratic structures. Given that the object of documentary is typically the socially low and, significantly, in this most famous instance, the socially low woman, Migrant Mother repeats the association of femininity with dirtiness, as well as the constitution of culture by the marking of its borders with dirt. The photograph represents the barely acceptable minimum of culture, because the image's formal beauty, by aestheticizing the dirtiness of the mother and children, allows them, as a rudimentary family, to provide a version of the conventional ground of domesticity. The image permits this repetition of the connection between femininity and dirtiness by appealing so successfully to aesthetic traditions, to art. As Martha Rosler observes, Migrant Mother pushes

against the gigantic ideological weight of classical beauty, which presses on us the understanding that in the search for transcendental form, the world is merely the stepping-off point into aesthetic eternality. ¹³

Migrant Mother is now usually seen apart from the other photographs in the same series, all taken within ten minutes of one another and representing conditions in a migrant workers' camp. As such, it divorces Florence Thompson and her children from all but the most broadly sketched social relations, and reproduces them as an icon of a universal human dignity. Their dirtiness, their lowliness, signifies an equally generalized hardship which it is the task of that dignity to transcend.

A similar argument may be made in regard to the anonymity of Lewis Hine's *Scrublady*, *N.Y.* (1920), in which a working-class woman is pictured

laboriously cleaning, on her knees, in a classic pose of submission to both economic circumstances and the photographer's gaze. Here the dual tasks of idealization and transcendence are assumed by Hine's own sculptural formality. These images no longer document specific historical circumstances, but tend toward the ahistoric and universal. Indeed, the figuration of Migrant Mother in the guise of a Madonna image places it within a familiar transcendental discourse. It was no doubt this familiarity that contributed to the selection of Migrant Mother from the series, its subsequent collection and display in the museum context, and its more central inclusion in the category of art. At the same time, the iconography of Lange's far less familiar Drought Refugees Hoping for Cotton Work, Blythe, California (1936) recalls a type of Renaissance Nativity scene, where Saint Joseph, like the father in Lange's photograph, sits with head resting on his hand. We might ask why the dirty mother has been enshrined as art, while the equally unfortunate father has not found his way into museum collections. Institutional selectivity, together with the relation of Migrant Mother to pictorial conventions, that is, render mother and children familiar, no matter how distant their circumstances from the viewer's experience. Indeed, Roy Stryker, director of the FSA, said in 1972 of Lange's photograph: ..

it was *the* picture of Farm Security....She has all of the suffering of mankind in her but all of the perseverance too....You can see anything you want in her. She is immortal. ¹⁴

Of course, this familiarity may be complicated, as in Marion Post Wolcott's Colored Maids with White Child in Stroller Visiting Together on Street Corner, Gibson, Mississippi (1940). Although a sense of neatness and cleanliness dominates this image of two African-American maids conversing behind a white child in a stroller, it frames a moment in a specific history of domination and draws on persistent stereotypes of the social roles of African-American women. These are stereotypes made poignantly ironic two years later in Gordon Parks' Washington, D.C. (1942), in which an African-American woman stands before a US flag, her mop and broom the trappings of office. The symmetry of Colored Maids may seem, on the one



Marion Post Wolcott, Colored Maids with White Child in Stroller Visiting Together on Street Corner, Gibson, Mississippi, 1940

hand, to normalize those stereotypes by positioning them within a highly organized representational space. But the photograph is ultimately jarring because it makes explicit a relationship in which servants, women who deal with other people's dirt, preserve an idealized, clean domesticity, whose continuity is represented by the child upon whom so much attention is focused. Where *Migrant Mother* reinforces an officially sanctioned version of individuality as the foundation of social order, *Colored Maids*, a far less frequently reproduced FSA photograph, resists a correspondingly seamless version of the middle-class family, pointing instead to its heterogeneity: in a complicated set of relationships, the white child is raised not only by its mother but by African-American women as well. The stereotypes remain familiar, but their hyperbolic treatment — the maids tower over their charge — is unsettling, as it reverses relations of dominance, making visible the junction of domesticity, class relations, and racial difference.

The simultaneous familiarization and abstraction of poor, disenfranchised working people, as in Migrant Mother, is one of the ways in which documentary has served to naturalize the class relations whose effects it sought to ameliorate. To the extent that Migrant Mother does represent class relations, it also reenacts tensions in the relations between photographer and photographed, between audience and object: whatever the actual agreement between Lange and Florence Thompson, the image does not, in fact cannot, give Thompson a voice of her own. Her agency is restricted to lending dignity to her own marginalization. The same might be said, in varying degrees, of Hine's Scrublady, in which even the woman's dignity is merely compositional; and of Colored Maids, in which Post Wolcott tactically restages a stereotype to reveal its operation. However, Migrant Mother and Colored Maids do not give their photographers voices, either. Despite the tendency of the single-image photograph to suggest a unitary authorial eye, the "truth" in FSA photographs and those of other documentary photographers working with more or less direct institutional support is not that of their authors, or theirs alone. Rather, they speak from the intersection of the photographers' individual practices with several other discourses, including:

that of government departments, that of journalism, more especially documentarism, and that of aesthetics, for example; each of them at a determinate stage of historical development; each of them incited and sustained by highly evolved social institutions. ¹⁶

We might add, here, that of a pervasive discourse on femininity.

Documentary's social activism can be offset or replaced by its own ability to make the limits of culture familiar.¹⁷ Contemporary evidence that this process of familiarization continues is provided by selections from Vaughn Sills' series *A Family I Know in Georgia* (1979–89). Sills' work, made without formal institutional support, addresses Florence Thompson's silence quite literally, at least adding the Georgia family's own words in texts which accompany the photographs. However, apart from the historically specific narratives of the difficulties of rural working-class life, especially for women, suggested by the texts and the work's production over the course of a decade, what is striking about the images themselves is their similarity to FSA photography: they are black-and-white, single-image photographs of the rural poor in their own homes. This similarity serves to suggest the persistence of both the economic conditions which give rise to these images and the documentary tradition which addresses those conditions in terms of domesticity.

The suggestion of narrative in Sills' work, its serial quality, and the inclusion of a text describing her own relationship to the Georgia family, point to a necessary complication of the documentary project. The fact that all the information which documentary has provided over the years has not altered the conditions it addresses has required photographers to reflect not only on those conditions but on their own representational strategies. This problem is explored in depth in the excerpts from Danielle Gustafson's *Domestic Relations* (1989), which are central to this exhibition. *Domestic Relations* is made up of a series of large, matter-of-fact, black-and-white, direct-flash photographs, principally of domestic labor — the mess that precipitates it, or its results — in and around the homes of Anne, a white, middle-class US citizen, and of Carla, her Guatemalan domestic servant for sixteen years. The large photographs both illustrate and are informed by an apparently straightforward narrative text and are also

accompanied by smaller, inset photographs in the same style. *Domestic Relations* meticulously details the workings of a domestic economy as it involves both middle-class and working-class households. It may be regarded in terms of Mary Douglas' argument that relations to dirt symbolize relations between different parts of the social body: the work repeatedly asks us to consider who cleans what.

Douglas' approach seems especially apt, insofar as Domestic Relations principally delineates the social boundaries between the two women. The series describes the constant negotiation of a hierarchical relationship through the question of who should be responsible for which dirt. This is at once necessary, if Carla is to come into Anne's private space to work, and compromised or complicated by the peculiar intimacy developed during Carla's sixteen years of employment. So, for instance, we see Carla handling Anne's dead mother's lace doilies, and are told of her resistance to Anne's instruction that they should be taken care of by Connie, formerly Anne's mother's servant. But we are also shown the papusas that Carla prepares as a friendly favor to another interloper, Gustafson herself, and told about Anne's husband Harry's discomfort when Gustafson sets a place at the table for Carla. Harry reacts to what he perceives as a disruption of the correct order of things, Carla discreetly removes herself, and Anne ends up defending Gustafson on the grounds that she and Carla often eat together, a domestic circumstance of which Harry is unaware. Clearly, domestic arrangements are symbolic here, as they reflect power relations, not only between women, but between the women of the house and Harry.

In Gustafson's work, documentary is no longer concerned with the revelation of any underlying, general truth, to be made available through representions of the socially low. Such practices are rendered suspect by the series' ironic inquiry into documentary tactics. This is evident, first of all, in the use of a familiar documentary style, in which references to classical beauty surface through an evidentiary presentation of middle-class domestic objects, objects unfamiliar in the documentary tradition; thus the oblique and ironic allusion to sculptural form via the bathroom towels. Further, *Domestic Relations* refuses the viewer a steady physical viewpoint. The entire series of photographs is at once too big and too small to make



Vaughn Sills, Tina, 1981



Danielle Gustafson, Domestic Relations, 1989 (detail)

sense as a bounded object: the viewer must stand back a certain distance to see the large photographs, and move closer to read the texts and see the small photographs. The texts provide a narrative and physical direction, but the work's size, coupled with the inconclusive open-endedness of the narrative, prevents it from encapsulating what it describes. While the layout may refer to the grid pattern in which FSA photography was displayed in municipal buildings, and to various perceptual grids of twentieth-century art, the viewer's movement in and out means that the grid fails to regulate or privilege a particular experience of the work. Similarly, the deadpan, autobiographical narrative, which describes not only Gustafson's participation in the domestic economy under her regard but some effects of her presence as documentarist, keeps the viewer from forming a continuous identification with any of the "characters." If the narrative is broadly sympathetic with Carla, this is at least complicated by the surprising revelation of Carla's own status as a domestic employer.

Inevitably, Domestic Relations reaches its audience primarily through the museum, so it represents the institutional movement of documentary away from at least some forms of activism. It remains overtly political in its relations to representational practice. If it deals scrupulously with the classrelated conditions of femininity and domesticity, recognizing the failures of canonical documentary, it does so by examining the putative empiricism of the documentary tradition. This is evident in the work's refusal to privilege a particular viewpoint, as we have seen, or to give priority either to photographs or text. Gustafson self-consciously avoids the superior vision which "we" are invited to share, and Domestic Relations does not include the viewer in an audience constituted by its relation to the objectification of class difference. The FSA's single-image photographs of individuals, produced directly under the auspices of the federal government, emphasized a stable representational space which corresponded to an official, idealized social order. 18 For Gustafson, on the contrary, a unified national audience is no longer feasible. In contrast to the migrant mother, the domestic servant no longer establishes the acceptable boundaries of a social space which frames the individual. Rather, the edges are brought to the now unstable center, because class and racial difference are given the

place which Marion Post Wolcott's *Colored Maids* foreshadowed. This may suggest that the category of individuality which informed and was supported by earlier documentary practices, and which effaced social difference, is no longer so firmly in place.

Abjection and Art

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death — a flat encephalograph, for instance — I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border.

— Julia Kristeva. 19

Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horro*r focuses on particular kinds of dirt and their constitutive effects on subjective relations to symbolic order, taking the instability of individuality as its point of departure. Kristeva recasts Douglas' anthropological account of pollution, via psychoanalytic theory, in terms of the workings of a subjective economy. She is concerned with those forms of dirt that simultaneously fascinate and revolt us, in a convulsion of subjectivity which collapses the socially prescribed integrity of the body and the border between its inside and its outside. This process of "abjection" is triggered in the first instance by substances which issue from the body: blood, menses, feces, urine, semen, vomit, saliva, breast milk; substances which blur the distinction between subject and object. For Kristeva, the articulation of the self in relation to its objects allows for the production of meaning, whereas "what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses." ²⁰

This follows from a psychoanalytic account of the infant's enrollment as a subject in the symbolic order of language, central to which is learning to delimit and control the body: the first delineation of self as separate from the maternal body is the prototype for subsequent separations of subject and object. Abjection is primarily articulated in relation to the maternal body. The individual's relation to social order, which in Kristeva's terms is the relation to symbolic order, is predicated on a demarcating imperative, subjectively experienced as abjection, which in its founding moment is played out over the body, and is "coextensive with social and symbolic order." This may be seen in the context of Douglas' observation that "the body is a model which can stand for any bounded system." ²³

Abjection, the subject's convulsed response to filth, is coextensive with social and symbolic order. Social and symbolic order is supposed to sustain the subject as differentiated. This coextension underlies the frailty of that order. Abjection shows me the perviousness of the borders of symbolic order (and hence my own), and its continuing, even structuring inability to define dirt out of existence. The prohibitions themselves, on which social and symbolic order are based, from the incest taboo to dietary regulations, simultaneously allow the subject to speak and produce cleanliness and filth, order and abjection. Kristeva credits Georges Bataille, who writes that abjection is linked to "the inability to assume with sufficient strength the imperative act of excluding," 24 with connecting "the production of the abject to the weakness of that prohibition, which, in other respects, necessarily constitutes each social order." 25 Bataille's theoretical and fictional writing, with its emphasis on heterogeneous elements ejected from social and cultural systems, provides the principal model of a symbolic practice constructed around the abject. For Bataille, heterogeneous elements are those not used up in production and consumption, but which represent an "unproductive expenditure" and resist homogenization.²⁶ The representation of these elements may be transgressive, when, by means of a radical negation of limits, it confronts social and symbolic order based on the supposed utility of production and consumption with its own repressive character.27

Abjection is brought to the fore in a group of works in this exhibition by Andres Serrano, Mary Ellen Carroll, and Cindy Sherman. These works might be termed transgressive, following Bataille and Kristeva, inso-

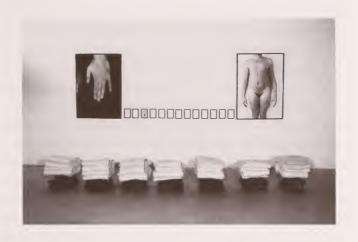
far as they confront symbolic prohibitions by taking, or appearing to take, the stuff of abjection as their principal material. Indeed, the theory of abjection provides one explanation for the outrage of certain critics in the face of such work. Serrano's Red River #3 (1989) is a photograph of menstrual blood, whose highly-finished, glamorous technique conforms to prevalent notions of seductiveness in art photography. An outraged response would only seem to confirm the proposition that the abject is disturbing because it tests the strength of the links between subjectivity and symbolic order. And the same "blind and dumb criticism," in Roland Barthes' phrase, however laden with party-political interest, responds to a question Red River #3 poses, that of its own status as art.28 To disclaim Serrano's work as filthy or obscene, as socially dirty, is clearly to regard it as tainted by matter out of place. Art and menstrual blood, a privileged signifier of femininity, do not or should not mix. Note that the women in documentary photography, dirtied by economic domination, have been allowed to cross the boundaries into art. Perhaps a physiologically internal flow is not the "proper" object of photography, considered as a medium of surfaces and reflected light.

Red River #3 is a formalized image of what is, for Kristeva, the privileged signifier of "danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual)." ²⁹ This is,a danger which reverberates in the subject's history, referring the subject back to a relation to the maternal body in which the separateness on which the identity of each sex depends is threatened, "in the face of sexual difference," by castration. ³⁰ Red River #3, then, is a formalization of the fragility structural to the process of demarcation. It exemplifies the notion that the materials taken to define femininity are abject, dirty, because they are supposedly unassimilable. Following Bataille, it might be seen as a deliberately perverse invitation to wallow in the unassimilable, as if at once to negate and appropriate its expulsion to the margins of culture.

Menstrual blood indexes a radical unassimilability which is the foundation of both subjectivity and abjection. In this context, femininity itself appears as abject. The works of Mary Ellen Carroll and Cindy Sherman depart from the other side of Bataille's negation, moving from the inside

of abjection out. Carroll's The Hand of Fatima (1989) consists of a series of small framed panels hung between two large black-and-white photographs, one of an older woman's hand, the other of a naked, fleshy man's body from neck to knees, with the penis tucked between the legs. One of the small panels reproduces a page from a journal of geriatrics from the 1950s, with a photograph "illustrating" the defeminization of the menopausal woman. The others, though they are numbered and captioned as if to continue this argument, are blank. The Hand of Fatima foregrounds the socially constructed, regulatory nature of the abjection of femininity, referring to medical discourses and institutions, of which psychoanalysis is still in many respects a part, via the journal of geriatrics. The corollary of menstrual abjection is that menopause, which is explicitly held to defeminize women, institutes a double abjection: femininity is abject when it is sexually threatening and when it is not. Menopause means that women become imperfect members of the (already abject) feminine category. Caught between abjections, there is a sense in which femininity disappears, except as a symbolic means of control. This may come as a surprise to many women who find themselves remarkably present, despite the dictates of medical and theoretical discourses (and the photographic documentation, or "evidence," to which Carroll refers). The Hand of Fatima meets these regulatory discourses of femininity with a counter-proposal, a feminized or demasculinized male body, an ironically abject, alternative castration.

Cindy Sherman's *Untitled #237* (1987-91), as technically glamorous as Serrano's *Red River #3*, is an image of vomit, the aftermath of the physical correlative of abjection, a convulsion which turns the body inside out. Again, hardly the traditional stuff of art. The literalness of Serrano's bloody map and Carroll's counter-proposal is matched here by the frank artificiality of Sherman's vomit. The effect of the work may best be considered in relation to Sherman's oeuvre, in which she has pictured herself as various feminine types, drawn from popular culture and art history. Sherman's investigation of conventions of representation might be regarded as a nose-thumbing parade of travesties of self-portraiture (including, in this exhibition, three *Untitled Film Stills*). If *Migrant Mother* stands at one



Mary Ellen Carroll, *The Hand of Fatima* (on wall) and *Keep Me Modest*, 1989

end of a continuum of institutionally sanctioned mimetic versions of individuality, the artist's self-portrait is at the other. Canonical history may render artists even more universal than Florence Thompson, as though "artist," with its baggage of "individual expression," were a kind of ultimate category of individuality. The chameleon character of Sherman's work, its staged quality and its refusal to reveal anything of the "real" Cindy Sherman, represents a critical response to conventional self-portraiture and the type of individuality it supports. Untitled #237 suggests that the contents of the body, its insides, do not determine, or accord with, its social inscription (you are not what you eat, after all); conventions of individuality, including those of femininity, come from outside. In this sense, Untitled #237 can be read as referring to the predominantly feminine and abject condition of bulimia; abject because its cycle of eating and vomiting, incorporation and ejection, represents a violently ambivalent relation to the social and symbolic ordering of the female body. What may be more important here is the theatricality of this abjection: this is not a photograph of real vomit, but a carnivalesque fabrication, something worked up. If Untitled #237 has any of the disquieting effect of Red River #3, then its ludic distanciation, like Carroll's severe irony, calls into question the unassimilability of the feminine-as-abject.

Although Serrano, Carroll, and Sherman deal with the stuff of abjection, transgression in their work is not utopian, as it is in Bataille's early work. For both Bataille and Kristeva, any transgression of the social order is necessarily and intimately linked to transgression of the symbolic order. This is a familiar, modernist avant–garde position, in which formal transgressions become crucial (hence the frequent references to poetry in Bataille's writing, and Kristeva's preoccupation with avant–garde writers). Transgression is essentially a question of consciousness. As Susan Suleiman puts it, for Bataille,

The experience of transgression is indissociable from the consciousness of the constraint or prohibition it violates; indeed, it is precisely by and through its transgression that the force of a prohibition becomes fully realized. ³²

Bataille would eventually go so far as to argue that transgression was necessary to social order: "The transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it....There exists no prohibition that cannot be transgressed. Often the transgression is permitted, often it is even prescribed." ¹³ If abjection is the lining of subjectivity, as Kristeva suggests (and as Sherman's Untitled #237 appears to), it follows that art which wraps itself in abjection should draw an ambivalent, fragmentary response. Given that individuality is bound up with symbolic order, invoking internal contradictions in one invokes them in the other. This may well be trangressive, and recent events within the National Endowment for the Arts and debates about its role suggest that in certain circumstances transgressive art may have some impact on both institutional and electoral politics, so that it should not be dismissed.34 However, Kristeva develops her arguments through a reading of the work of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, who flaved open subjectivity but remained an unrepentant anti-Semite and Nazi — as if to demonstrate that avant-garde transgressions cannot guarantee a particular mode of political engagement.35

Modernist, avant-garde transgressive models like Bataille's and Kristeva's are thrown into relief by the work of Sherman and Carroll. Too much can be made of artistic tactics of distanciation. Irony (in all its variegated shadings) and its analogues are not values in and of themselves, but they do allow the work of these artists not so much to reproduce abjection as to appear to be documenting it. Distanciation thus allows the work to be reflexive, to point to itself as work (consider the artificiality of Sherman's Untitled #237), and to point to abjection itself as a formal property. In Carroll's The Hand of Fatima, in particular, abjection becomes information. Carroll displaces the avant-gardist, transgressive potential of abjection in favor of a practice in which the abject is as much a found text as is a 1950s medical journal or a Christian myth. Her work demonstrates an awareness of the power and fragility of the prohibitions which impinge on femininity, but it does not accept a generalized subjective relation to them. The Hand of Fatima has many margins. Rather than pushing toward the collapse of meaning in the silence and laughter of the avant-garde, it insists on a communicative model of cultural practice.

A model of artistic practice which insists on its ability to communicate might be contrasted with the later work of Bataille, after the advent of fascism. In the 1920s and 1930s, Bataille had linked transgression to antiauthoritarian, liberatory politics: after the war, as we have seen, he referred to transgression as part of the fabric of social order. The shattering experience of fascism (and subsequently Stalinism) drove him, and others, into a somewhat hermetic avant–gardism. Contemporary artists have the sorry advantage of seeing the failures of avant–gardism before them. This is not to suggest that Sherman's reflexivity, for instance, represents a coolly pragmatic practice while Bataille's was some kind of headlong rush into a theoretical void (clearly, Bataille's writings represent an extremely self-conscious, purposeful engagement with symbolic order). On the contrary, shifts in Bataille's work provide a historical precedent that enables contemporary art engaged with the abject to reflect upon its own processes.

More broadly, the historical conditions of what can be seen as Bataille's retreat, the postwar fragmentation of European bourgeois life, provide an analytical departure point for contemporary art. This is seen more clearly in relation to Kristeva's continuation of avant-garde traditions. Bataille and the majority of avant-gardists identified themselves with the margins of social and symbolic order and tended to use "the feminine" as a metaphor for whatever lay beyond. Kristeva's establishment of the relation to the maternal body, the originary moment of the separation of subject and object, as the originary moment of abjection is effectively within the same tradition. For women, it follows that the transgressive aesthetic task of "retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being," 36 would, in Kristeva's terms, be a collapse back into undifferentiated homology. This would collapse the distinction between subject and object, whereas abjection in the avant-gardist transgressions she describes is located in the ambivalent blurring of that distinction. Which is to say, the transgressive aesthetic task Kristeva identifies is carried out not by women but by men (it almost goes without saying, white men).37

The relationship of Serrano, a minority artist, to social and symbolic order, and those of Sherman and Carroll, as women, are different. They are not white men, and they cannot choose to identify themselves with

margins which avant-garde traditions and Kristeva's work suggest they are already in, at least not in the same way as could Bataille, for instance. It is true that Serrano and Sherman are celebrated and successful, but to raise this as an objection to the argument would be to miss the point: for those whom not only order but avant-garde and psychoanalytically derived notions of transgression would place in the margins, success must be structurally different. Indeed, these artists' relation to it must be structured by difference. This suggests that the social order these artists inhabit may be as fragmented as that in which Bataille wound up. So the determination of subjective relations to symbolic order — which underlies abjection and transgression — is rendered even more complicated. Reflecting the heterogeneity of subjective relations to order, the works of these artists, in a sense, are skeptical documents about the coding of difference. What they address is the contingency, within a given, fragmented social order, of that process of demarcation of the body which is said to be the ground of abjection, of dirt.

Dirty Work

I smell sweet, I sparkle. My jacket fits immaculately, my socks hug my legs. Thus I saunter through the busy streets of the suburb to recover from the mental strain of the morning. The removal man is struggling with pieces of furniture, the garage mechanic is writhing under wheels. How insensitive they all are. I am glad to be near them and enjoy the distance that separates us. The blue overall goes well with their fresh faces too. I must make a note of that. As soon as they see me, they look down at the ground. Remarkable how any comparison always favours me! Thank God for dirt.

— Christian Enzensberger. 38

Fish that crawl, reptiles that go on land but not on their feet, swarming things whose way of moving through their element is indeterminate: these biblical abominations are hybrids, intermingled collections of characteristics which should be separate. Mary Douglas and Julia Kristeva both recognize ways in which various social and symbolic interminglings are defined as dirty. They are unclean, according to Douglas, either because

they are "imperfect members of their class" or because their class itself "confounds the general scheme of the world." For Douglas, hybrids disturb structures of ideas, schemes of things based on systematic inclusion and exclusion: fitting neither one definition nor another, the hybrid exposes the permeability of those bounded systems modeled on the body. Kristeva's emphasis on processes of demarcation and separation underlying subjectivity means that hybrids, as embodiments of ambiguity, threaten identity itself.

There is a curious theoretical correlative to fish that crawl in *Smut*, Christian Enzensberger's hyperbolically reflexive, interdisciplinary "study" of dirt. Enzensberger draws on Douglas' work and prefigures and explores the queasiness with which Kristeva begins — "When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk." ⁴⁰ He jumps between different kinds of discourse: from apparently serious theoretical speculations to apparently fictional fragments; he quotes Douglas, Samuel Beckett, Thomas Mann and refers to scientific and pseudo-scientific texts; one of the book's "narrators" quotes from his own fictional novel (that is, one which does not exist). Completing the mockery of encompassing theoretical efforts, Enzensberger describes the book's own practice in the third person: "So when do we get his thesis?" ⁴¹ In terms of discursive categories, therefore, *Smut* may quite deliberately undermine its own ability to tell us about dirt, yet its flagrant hybridity *shows us*. It is a dirty book.

Enzensberger's book provides a model for understanding a number of disparate works in this exhibition. These works do not deal directly with the abject or, at least at first glance, dirt, but they have this in common: they approach aspects of domesticity via the enactment of hybridity. Neither ejected nor appropriated, dirt resurfaces here as a formal property. The work falls into three broad categories. The first, which includes work by Dana Duff, Ann Hamilton, and Lynne Yamamoto, intermingles forms of labor, artistic and domestic. In Duff's *Odor di Femina* (1989), the viscous, smelly liquids and other stuffs of domestic and cosmetic labor, combined in decorative glass "bowls," are made into surprisingly beautiful mementos of those labors, but by another kind of labor. These are the gleaming, wet treasures of an alternative "women's work" which pro-

duces other values out of and in place of domesticity and femininity, by way of a witty artistic recycling. Ann Hamilton's *still life* (1988), a swell of eight hundred cleaned, ironed, and folded men's shirts atop a large table, is a sculptural form, the document of a performance, ⁴² and a document of and metaphor for the wave of domestic labor in front of which flutters the flag of masculinity. What is dragged along in the undertow, together with femininity, is a set of class and, in all likelihood, race relations. In a sense, *still life* repeats the question in Danielle Gustafson's *Domestic Relations*: who cleans what? Confronted by this volume of labor, we have to ask who does it.

Similarly, Lynne Yamamoto's *Ten in One Hour* (1992) uses the materials of domestic labor to rescue the history of her grandmother, a Hawaiian plantation bride, who took in washing and drowned herself in a tiny wooden tub. *Ten in One Hour* reproduces the tub, the homemade soap, and the woman's hair. But the soap and hair, combined to form curious, sprouting objects and no longer submerged in Yamamoto's tub, now serve to suggest the claustrophobic intimacy of relations between labor and oppression. Duff, Hamilton, and Yamamoto cross categories of labor, mixing not only artistic and domestic, but different modes of artistic practice: while their work draws on aesthetic traditions, the materials they use create a paradoxically evidentiary quality, as if their hybrid formalizations furnished evidence, perhaps proof, of the discreet but obsessive nature of the domestic activity of keeping dirt at bay.

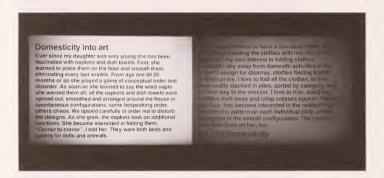
Works by Carrie Mae Weems and Pat Ward Williams depart from the categorical imperatives of earlier traditions of documentary photography. They render documentary's claims to truth suspect. In a series of black-and-white photographic tableaux and an idiomatic text, Weems' *Untitled* (1990) narrates a relationship between a successful woman and a man who seems unable to keep up with her. The photographs themselves may refer to documentary conventions, but they cannot be divorced from the textual narrative of a contested domesticity, the historical truth of which (in this case perhaps its autobiographical content) is undecidable. So the work appears as the staged or fictional documentation of a narrative which is itself of uncertain status. What is evident is that the domestic life being nar-

rated is African-American, a life usually seen within very limited parameters. Weems does not confront these stereotypical expectations; rather, by mixing formal conventions, unsettling the viewer's place in the scheme of things, she refuses to give these expectations comfortable purchase. The inverse correlative of this may be seen in Pat Ward Williams' Ghosts That Smell Like Cornbread (1987). An arched, hinged frame that might once have held a mirror and which now holds a fragmentary montage narrative, which moves from a photograph of the artist's own hand holding a fan of family snapshots to enlargements of figures from those photographs, sits on a table made into a shrine by a circle of stones around a broken cup. In this work, snapshots, which as the putatively least artful of photographs seem even closer to the truth than documentary images, must serve to trace a lost family history; or, in effect, the loss of a family history, for these are women in Ward Williams' own family whom she was never able to know. This use of what are conventional signifiers of familiarity has a poignancy that is underscored by their incorporation in the shrine decorated with another domestic relic; but by re-presenting them within artistic practice Ward Williams produces a reflexive commentary that opens onto a history of racial, and representational, oppression. Ghosts That Smell Like Cornbread converts signifiers of familiarity, of presence, into signifiers of loss. This is not simply a questioning of the fallibility of documentation, but of its historically determined absence.

Ward Williams reflects on the inaccessibility of certain narratives, on their fragmentation and contingency. Weems tells a story, and whether she made it up or it happened to her or both is beside the point of the telling. In a third group of hybrids, Martha Rosler and Myrel Chernick remove the images from the captions, so to speak, to test the narrative or textual supports. Rosler's *A budding gourmet* (first mailed, January-April 1974), *McTowersMaid* (September-December 1974), *Tijuana Maid* (October 1975-February 1976) and *A New-Found Career* (November 1976 - April 1977) are sets of postcards without pictures. Like Ward Williams' family snaps, they have a tentative relation to aesthetic traditions; and as Ward Williams reverses the conventional significations of snapshots, so Rosler reverses those of postcards. Instead of blithe kitsch, encapsulating



Pat Ward Williams, Ghosts That Smell Like Combread, 1987



Myrel Chernick, She Was, She Wasn't, 1991

Foreign and Familiar Bodies

images of vacation highlights far from home, each of Rosler's cards is a typewritten section of a miniature "novel" that deals explicitly with the details of class relations as they affect women's labor. Abandoning notions of objectivity which attend documentary photography, these narratives are not "true," but rather compiled from various sources. Their critical relation to documentary practices lies in their ability to express "truth" nonetheless. What Rosler's "dirty" tactics suggest is that wherever truth may reside, meaning, at least, has to be made, or compiled.

Myrel Chernick's *She Wasn She Wasn't* (1991) consists of alternating slide-projected texts on backgrounds that are initially blue and pink, for the genders of the principal narrator's two children, but which gradually merge. As in Rosler's work, there are no images, though in both cases the text also functions as an image. In place of images of domesticity, of the family on vacation or of the twins at various ages, Chernick substitutes a text which by virtue of being projected is even more of a hybrid than Enzensberger's; a dirty book is made dirtier by not being a book. Like *Smut*, *She Wasn't* is unreliably reflexively autobiographical. It shifts about among fragments of first-person narrative and apparently fictional narrative; between observation, speculation and quotation. Here experience guarantees little: the conventional ground of domesticity, the relation between motherhood and femininity, is itself a complex, ongoing interplay of representations, a continuous process of intermingling. It's not a hybrid but a process of hybridization: in short, it's a mess. And just as well.

Clean is neither well nor good, clean is clever cold white. Dirty is low and near, clean is above and all around. Of dirty you could at least say, but clean is nothing, clean is dirty angry and sick, clean is powerful, clean is here to stay: so be advised.

- Enzensberger. 43

Notes

- 1. Phyllis Palmer, Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920-1945 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), p.139.
- 2. Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (1966; ed. London: Ark Paperbacks, 1984), p.2. In chapter 5, "Primitive Worlds," pp.73-93, Douglas addresses the use of the term "primitive," suggesting that (p.74) "our professional delicacy in avoiding the term 'Primitive' is the product of secret convictions of superiority," and that the term has valid meanings which should not be abandoned. More than twenty years later, it seems clear that Douglas' attempt to relieve the term of pejorative value was not successful.
 - 3. Ibid., p.34.
 - 4. Ibid., p.35.
 - 5. Ibid.
 - 6. Ibid.
 - 7. Palmer, Domesticity and Dirt, p.139.
 - 8. Ibid., p.138.
 - 9. Ibid.
 - 10. Douglas, Purity and Danger, p.121.
 - 11. Ibid., p.35.
- 12. Martha Rosler, "In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)," in Martha Rosler, 3 Works (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981), p.75. The FSA was set up in 1935 to support federal New Deal programs by documenting the effects of the Depression on rural labor; for a brief history, see John Tagg, "The Currency of the Photograph," in Victor Burgin, ed., Thinking Photography (London: Macmillan Education, 1982), pp.110-41; see ako Rosler, "In, Around, and Afterthoughts," pp.75–77.
 - 13. Rosler, "In, Around, and Afterthoughts," p.76.

- 14. Ibid.
- 15. For a more detailed reading of Post Wolcott's and other less well-known FSA photographs, see Sally Stein, "Marion Post Wolcott: Thoughts on Some Lesser Known F.S.A. Photography," in *Marion Post Wolcott: F.S.A. Photographs* (Carmel, California: The Friends of Photography, 1983), pp.3-10, and pp.5-6 for *Colored Maids*.
- 16.Tagg, "The Currency of the Photograph," p.130.
- 17. Rosler, "In, Around, and Afterthoughts," p.80. Rosler concludes that "the common acceptance of the idea that documentary precedes, supplants, transcends, or cures full, substantive social activism is an indicator that we do not yet have a real documentary."
- 18. The argument relating representational space and social order is put forward by Sally Stein, "Good Fences Make Good Neighbors: American Resistance to Photomontage Between the Wars," in Matthew Teitelbaum, ed., Montage and Modem Life (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1992).
- 19. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980), trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.3.
 - 20. Ibid., p.2.
- 21. Kristeva's work draws on Jacques Lacan's reworking of Sigmund Freud's Oedipal drama in terms of structural linguistics. See Jacques Lacan, Écits: A Selection, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977), especially pp.1–7, 30–113. For Kristeva, following Lacan, the symbolic order implies "the dependence and articulation of the speaking subject in the order of language," and "the only concrete universality that defines the speaking being" is "the signifying process"; Powers of Horror, p.67.

- 22. Ibid., p.68.
- 23. Douglas, Purity and Danger, p.115.
- 24. Kristeva, Powers of Horror, p.64, quoting Georges Bataille, "L'abjection et les formes misérables," Essais de sociologie, Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1970), II, p.217.
- 25. Bataille, "L'abjection et les formes misérables ," p.217.
- 26. Georges Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," in Bataille, Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939, trans. A. Stockl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p.118.
- 27. Bataille, "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade (An Open Letter to My Current Comrades)," in *Visious of Excess*, pp.97-98. See also "The Notion of Expenditure," pp.118-20.
- 28. Roland Barthes, "Blind and Dumb Criticism," in Barthes, Mythologies, trans. Annette Lavers (Frogmore, St. Albans, England: Paladin, 1973), pp.34-35. Barthes brilliantly pinpointed a tactic of those critics for whom "knowledge is Evil, they both grew on the same tree," and for whom "culture should be nothing but a sweet rhetorical effusion." Such critics confess their own stupidity, but only on the basis of such a firm belief in their own intelligence that acknowledging an inability to understand amounts to saying, "I don't understand, therefore you are idiots."
 - 29. Kristeva, Powers of Horror, p.71
 - 30. Ibid.
- 31. I am indebted to my co-curator, Kate Haug, for discussion of this point.
- 32. Susan Rubin Suleiman, Subversive Intent-Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), p.75.
- Georges Bataille, Erotism. Death and Sensuality, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), p.63.

- 34. David Trend outlines some of these effects in "Burning the Flagged at the NEA," *Afterimage*, 19 (March 1992), p.3.
 - 35. Kristeva, Powers of Horror, p.136.
 - 36. Ibid., p.18.
- 37. Ibid.: "Great modern literature unfolds over that terrain: Dostoyevsky, Lautréamont, Proust, Artaud, Kafka, Céline." In relation to earlierwork, Suleiman, Subversive Intent, p.18, observes that Kristeva "has even discussed...why in terms of her theory it is virtually impossible for a woman to achieve a similar status. In order to be truly innovative, one has to be able to risk giving up 'la légitimation paternelle'; but if women take that risk, what awaits them more often than not is madness or suicide."
- 38. Christian Enzensberger, Smut: An Anatomy of Dirt, trans. Sandra Morris (London: Calder and Boyars, 1972), p.56.
 - 39. Douglas, Purity and Danger, p.55
- 40. Kristeva, *Powers of Horor*, p.2. Indeed, in his idiosyncratic way, Enzensberger, *Simut*, pp.22-23, prefigures Kristeva's concern with separability: "dirt is anything that threatens the proper separateness of the individual, his anxiously guarded isolation... in any confrontation he is afraid of succumbing to the ambiguity and mishmash, of flowing apart....this is why when asked for examples of dirt he includes so many compound substances and intermediate states."
 - 41. Ibid., p.33.
- 42, still life first appeared as a performance installation in Home Show, an exhibition of site specific works made in people's homes, Home Show, 10 Artists' Installations in 10 Santa Barbara Homes (Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum, 1988)
 - 43. Enzensberger, Smut, p.127

Myth and Matriarchy: An Analysis of the Mammy Stereotype

Kate Haug

Skin, as the key signifier of cultural and racial difference in the stereotype, is the most visible of fetishes, recognized as common knowledge in a range of cultural, political, historical discourses, and plays a public part in the racial drama that is enacted everyday in colonial societies.

— Homi K. Bhabha 1

Lingering beneath the notion of the black matriarch is an unspoken indictment of our female forebears as having actively assented to slavery. The notorious cliché, the "emasculating female," has its roots in the fallacious inference that in playing a central role in the slave "family," the black woman related to the slaveholding class as collaborator. Nothing could be further from the truth.

— Angela Davis²

This is an investigation of the historical and cultural forces that produced the Aunt Jemima or Mammy stereotype. The investigation treats two correlative questions: first, how the Mammy stereotype functions at specific moments in the United States within a community which identifies itself as white; and, second, how it affects representational strategies of artists working with images of African-American women.

I have attempted to separate the historical analysis of domestic workers and their conditions from the critical analysis of the specific dynamics of the Mammy stereotype. The stereotype cannot be considered as even a partial representation of women in the African-American community.

The essay establishes a critical link between the disparate sources of representation (historical documentation, cinema, radio shows, cartoons, advertising, television, and literature) and the institutional practices of legislation, economic distribution, and constructions of femininity.

When we look at the Mannny stereotype as a compilation of contradictory and incongruous characteristics, we recognize the paradox implicit in racist discourse: to construct the African-American woman as masculine within her own family and maternal in the white family; as asexual in relation to the white woman and sexual when positioned alone with the white male; as emasculator of the Black man and powerless within the white patriarchy.

Inherent in the Mammy figure is the myth of a Black matriarchy. This myth is necessarily contested by African-Americans since it serves the racist, hegemonic order of white males in two ways: first, by presenting a false representation of harmonious black/white relations; second, by coopting the image of the working African-American woman into a stereotype that upholds racist and patriarchal ideology. This stereotype, in its most effective moments, places women in opposition to one another.

The Mammy figure can be defined as a large, very black, middle-aged woman employed as a domestic. Her visual appearance connotes an independent, headstrong, dominant personality through her physical stature and cantankerous approach. The clothing of Mammy progressed from the slavery-type frocks of plain dresses with headscarves (D.W. Griffith, *Birth of a Nation*, 1915, and *Gone with the Wind*, 1939) to the black-and-white outfits worn by maids whose hair was pulled back and covered with some type of servant head wear—Louise Beavers in *Imitation of Life*, 1934. From the 1970s onward, the African-American woman is reconfigured as a more independent, modern version of the Mammy figure. An example of this is Florence Johnston, the maid in the television series *The Jeffersons*. She is a slimmer, sassier figure but retains the Mammy's emasculating characteristic by her verbal opposition to her employer, George Jefferson.

Historical Inscription of the Myth

Records do acknowledge the presence of female slaves who served as the "right hand" of the plantation mistresses. Yet documents from the planter class during the first fifty years following the American Revolution reveal only a handful of such examples. Not

until after Emancipation did black women run white households or occupy in any significant number the special positions ascribed to them in folklore and fiction.³

The discrepancy between the actual records and recorded "fact" demands an examination of the historical process itself. The word "Mammy" appeared in dictionaries and travel logs throughout the nineteenth century, but these definitions and casual references do not constitute factuality. The Mammy first appeared as a "historical figure" in Thomas Nelson Page's The Old South (1889), a nostalgic account of the antebellum South. Patricia Norton writes that Page "presented this figure as strictly factual, emphasizing that the historian must always 'tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." 4 The assumption of the Mammy figure as a historical figure distinguishes her from more overtly created stereotypes such as Sambo and Uncle Tom. The supposition that she was an actual social reality within the plantation household is crucial to our examination of the political employment of stereotypes. It exemplifies the process whereby colonial myth became historical fact, and myth, to quote Murray Edelman, "is typically socially cued rather than empirically based."5

Establishing Social Order Through Representation: Putting the Mammy in Her Place

While Northern cities were facing post-World War I race riots, white supremacists in the South had reinforced racial oppression through lynch mobs, segregation, and powerful political organizations like the Ku Klux Klan. Slavery became romanticized in historical accounts as a "kindly and paternalistic institution" offering a "model of racial and social control." ⁶

The primary function of the Mammy figure was to obscure the actual social interaction between slaves and slave owners and, later, the existing relations between African-American domestic workers and white employers. The Mammy stereotype represents a domestic worker along the lines of the Brītish nanny rather than a beaten and abused slave woman. Her displayed intimacy with and concern for the white family shows



Victor Fleming, frame from Gone with the Wind, 1939



John M. Stahl, frame from Imitation of Life, 1934

a private, personal space for the blurring of race distinction. This intimate knowledge, however, never makes the Mammy figure socially emancipated or threatening, only more useful in serving her surrogate family. In fact, the Mammy figure's maternal traits are usually seen in the context of the white family: "Her own family is not only kept in the background, they are literally out of the picture."

In the 1930s the Mammy was a popular stock character in Hollywood films such as *Imitation of Life* and the national blockbuster *Gone with the Wind*. The appeal of the Mammy figure is ironically evident in the Academy Award Hattie McDaniel received for her performance of "Mammy" in *Gone with the Wind*. The performance was no doubt worthy of praise, but it is telling that the first Academy Award presented to any African-American, man or women, was for the performance of a stereotype.

In some instances, the Mannny figure can be seen as slow-moving or indolent; more often the figure is depicted as laboring. Yet this labor is never recognized. The servant status of the Mannny figure naturalizes labor, suggesting "that there exists a great deal of satisfaction on the part of black women relative to performing these types of duties [domestic labor]." ⁸

But in the slave community, controlling one's production was a form of resistance. In film, however, such self-determination was interpreted as laziness. Despite moments of portrayed sluggish response, the Mammy was always on call, never sharing the needs of her white film counterpart for sleep, an autonomous family, or vacation. In her silent servitude, Mammy allows the white viewer to identify with having a servant while occluding the actual conditions of slavery, sub-standard wages, and Jim Crow discrimination.

On screen, relationships between film Mammies and their employers not only completely distort the African-American woman's relationship to her own community, but also diminish the valuable role African-American women had as domestic servants "socializ[ing] white children; thereby, producing businessmen, doctors, lawyers, and other professionals." The importance of this relationship is clearly acknowledged by

То Мамму

CAROLINE BARR

Mississippi [1840–1940]

Who was born in slavery and who gave to my family a fidelity without stint or calculation of recompense and to my childhood an immeasurable devotion and love

William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses* (New York: Random House, 1940), dedication page.

William Faulkner's dedication to "Mammy—Caroline Barr" in his 1940 novel *Go Down, Moses* and by Howell Raines, author of the 1991 *New York Times Magazine* story "Grady's Gift." The text on the magazine cover, accompanied by a color photograph of Gradystein Williams Hutchinson, reads: "Grady showed up one day at our house at 1409 Fifth Avenue West in Birmingham, and by and by she changed the way I saw the world." Both the dedication and the story mingle the Mammy stereotype with lived experience in a way that perpetuates her stereotypical devotion to the family and is uncritical of its implicit power relationship. Yet the fact that both both men credit their caregivers in such a eulogizing format exposes the important role these women had in their lives.

The Myth of the Black Matriarchy and the Mammy Stereotype

The myth of the Black matriarchy is clearly founded on the Mammy stereotype: "Implicit in the image of the Black matriarch are the same characteristics which are associated with Mammy. Both are conceptualized as being strong, stout, aggressive, domineering and capable of taking care of themselves, all of which suggests masculinity." 11 There was legal precedence for a Black matriarchy during slavery: "In 1662 the Virginia assembly passed legislation which declared that slave offspring inherited the status of the mother." 12 The political condition of slavery, though, did not allow any Black person to act politically. Therefore, the term matriarchy in this contest can be seen as a capitalist device which allowed slave owners to escape paternal responsibilities for their mulatto children born to slave women. During slavery, the "material production" of African-Americans was defined in white supremacist terms by their ability to reproduce a work force. In conjunction with this hegemonic value system, the African-American woman, the biological site and legal order of reproduction, was inscribed as powerful. All children born to African-American women were, in legal terms, not mixed but African-American and, during slavery, slaves. The legal definition of patriarchy circumscribes the ability to produce heirs through the paternal body. The

male slave had no legal heir and was thus viewed as a random fornicator without the right to conceive and maintain a family.

The Mammy directly emasculated the African-American male in her role as "head of the household," a role primarily reserved for males within the patriarchal hierarchy. Ironically, the Black man simultaneously carries the childish connotations of Sambo and the mark of pure genitalia as discussed by Frantz Fanon: "one is no longer aware of the Negro but only of a penis; the Negro is eclipsed." ¹³ William H.Grier and Price M.Cobbs elaborate on this contradiction, illuminating the contrast between mythical virility and economic castration:

The black man occupies a very special sexual role in American society. He is seen as the ultimate in virility and masculine vigor. But at the same time he is regarded as socially, economically and politically castrated and he is gravely handicapped in performing every other masculine role. ¹⁴

The supposed transference of power from the African-American male figure to the African-American female figure through legislation and cultural mythology works to create an operative field of socially accepted knowledge. Such knowledge is perpetuated in the 1965 Moynihan Report.

The research conducted on the African-American family by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then Assistant Secretary of Labor, concluded that this family was structured according to matriarchal principles. The Johnson administration intended to use Moynihan's report as the basis for policy formation. This report, in Patricia Morton's summary, held that: "because of slavery's oppressiveness, the slave family became a fatherless, female-dominated, 'disorganized' institution. Over time, this 'black matriarch' had become a self-perpetuating familial pattern which now constituted 'the fundamental source of weakness in the Negro community." In Moynihan's fiction, the African-American woman is constructed as an incapable parent and, by implication, responsible for the erosion of the African-American family. His report clearly illustrates how institutional racism toward the African-American community is fortified by sexism. One of the clearest fallacies of the Moynihan report is the definition con-

cerning matriarchy. The word matriarchy implies a position of power capable of political change, personal control, and economic mobility. Within the terms of slavery, however, neither the slave man nor the slave woman held any decisive legal power over their lives or the lives of their family members. Angela Davis addresses the fallacious application of the term matriarchy to a subaltern community: "Inherent in the very concept of matriarch is 'power.' It would have been exceedingly risky for the slave-holding class to openly acknowledge symbols of authority—female symbols no less than male." ¹⁶

The patriarchal context of this matriarchal definition in the Moynihan report must be examined. In antebellum white plantation society, the woman maintained a specific role to ensure not only her identity as feminine but her husband's identity as masculine. After Emancipation, the economic conditions of most African–American families necessitated both males and females to become wage earners. Therefore the bourgeois model of the middle class, nuclear family remained largely inaccessible to the African–American community.

Rather than discuss the crisis of the African-American community in terms of economic oppression and racist practices, Moynihan explains it in terms of a matriarchal structure. In Moynihan's hypothesis, the violence and the crime of the ghetto are direct results of women working outside the home. Without the proper maternal care, the child is assumed to be neglected by his own mother, resulting in a stereotype of the African-American male: the criminal or the thug. Ice Cube, the contemporary rap artist, employs this stereotype in speaking of the false perception of the Black family: "I'm crazy as a chump, see, cuz my mama didn't love me." ¹⁷ By blaming the inability to economically and socially assimilate on the myth of the Black matriarchy, Moynihan's report in fact absolves the government and the white constituencies of any political responsibility toward the Black community.

Household Figures: The Mammy and the Mistress

In the white home, the matriarchal figure of the Mammy becomes a masculinized worker, underscoring the contradictory use of the term matriarchy within American politics. Mae King writes about the exploitative manipulation of gender in representations of African-American women:

Black women are featured as tough, hard-working domestics who assume the role of matriarch in the home but somehow always manage to know their place and remain appropriately submissive in the white world. Such an image permits the most outrageous exploitation of black females as a cheap labor source. By "de-feminizing" them, America could subject them to the most harsh and unsafe working conditions without violating the white ethics that sustain the system. ¹⁸

As a servant, the Mammy figure occupied a unique position in relation to labor and definitions of femininity. Entry into the work force broke the conventions of femininity practiced by white Southern society. After Emancipation, sub-standard wages for African-American domestic workers allowed even poor whites to hire a servant. The physical and dirty labor of housework associated the servant with the body, sexuality, and moral impurity. In contrast, the ideal image of a white woman was associated with purity, refinement, leisure, and personal cleanliness, reifying classist conceptions of gender.

The reading of the Mammy figure is extremely ambivalent regarding her position in the white household. One reading suggests that the Mammy is not threatening to the white mistress. The Mammy's skin tone is always very dark to contrast with the pale skin, a signifier of a dominant conception of beauty, of her mistress. The other reading, based on racist American mythology, conceives dark skin as sexually charged.

This visual play between the Mammy and her white counterpart is heavily informed by sexist ideology. Neither figure is a positive or inclusive image of womanhood. The dialogue between the two sets up a paradigm of femininity based on exclusion:

Rather, the cult of true womanhood drew its ideological boundaries to exclude another definition of black women from "woman." The image of the strong, nonsubmissive black female head of a household did not become a positive image, but, on the contrary, because it transgressed what Gilman referred to as the three "golden threads," it became a figure of oppressive proportions with unnatural attributes of masculine power.¹⁹

As an emblem of the white patriarch's ability to institute and maintain order, the white woman must at all times exhibit control over her own body and desires. The image of the white Southern belle (demure, thin, soft-spoken, and submissive) embodies a patriarchal conception of femininity which is established in relation to the Mammy, who is presented as overweight, loud, dominant, and matriarchal (i.e., outside the boundaries of patriarchal structure). The Mammy figure assumes a masculinized gender construction in juxtaposition to the white female.

Among the feminine figures within a mixed race household, the Mammy stands in for what cannot be shown in a Black-white domestic setting. The overtly desexualized, supposedly uglified Mammy—black skin, rotund figure—conceals the mulatto, evidence of antebellum Black/white sexual relations.

One of the effects of portraying the black woman as the antithesis of the white woman, or images depicted by the media of the white woman, who is synonymous with femininity, is the denial of sexual attractiveness of the black woman; hence, the total negation of the numerous sexual exploits and abuses inherent in the institution of slavery and those after the abolition of this system.²⁰

The actual body of the mulatto disrupts legislative policy and social conventions pertaining to both Black/white sexual relations and concepts of racial purity.

Household Figures: The Oedipal Complex

The Mammy's association with food and its olfactory and oral pleasures makes her an appealing presence. Her status as a wet nurse increases her

sexual appeal to its maximum potential. Within the literature and mythology concerning the South, the Mammy is often placed within a context of maternal sexuality:

Southern orators who alluded to being "suckled at black breasts" were not, as they hoped, simply establishing a tender family feeling between the races with this image of interracial innocence. The vision in fact evoked far more than those spokesmen had bargained for; first and foremost, its erotic component cannot be denied....Second, the image reduced black women to an animal-like state of exploitation: Mammies were to be milked, warm bodies to serve white needs—an image with its own sexual subtext.²¹

The confusing situation wrought by the motherlike Manniny figure and the actual white mother is analogous to the encounter between the European nanny and the bourgeois mother. The intimate functions of childhood, such as breast-feeding, toilet training, and daily discipline, were the responsibility of the nanny and the supposed Manniny. Once again, the historical reality of domestic workers and their representation merge in a distorted form. Though the Manniny is represented as a caretaker of children, the Oedipal implications are never discussed within her portrayal. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, suggest that Freud replaces his mother with his nurse in the Oedipal formula:

Yet if Freud himself associated "crying his heart out" with the loss of his nurse, this association is "rectified" at the end of the same letter where Freud affirms that "falling in love with the mother" is the "universal event"....Paradoxically, to desire one's mother, despite the incestuous implications, is more acceptable than to desire a hired help....Thus, Freud's grief (he cried "his heart out" for nurse and mother alike) is split between an acceptable and an unacceptable mother: "his actual mother—whose nakedness he can mention only in Latin—and Nannie whom he remembers in association with numerous disturbing sexual experiences." ²²

This postulation between a shrouded, "acceptable mother" and a sexualized, "unaceptable mother" is extremely useful when sorting out the

Oedipal implications of the plantation scenario which positioned the African-American woman, African-American man, white woman, and white man. African-American women and white men were physically intimate on many levels within the social schema of the plantation. African-Americans who served in the house were wet nurses, cooks, and baby-sitters. The white southern "gentleman" and the pristine Southern belle were reared by African-American women. As these "gentlemen" grew older, they became men wielding power over the slave's body, the reverse of their childhood situation. The relation between the white child and the African-American house servants takes on the configuration of the Oedipal complex, but the race difference compounds the incest taboo with miscegenation.

Sexual relations between African-American women and white men are well documented through reports by both slaves and slave owners: "In his 1838 *Memoir on Slavery*, one Southerner argues that slave-planter copulation provided for a "less depraving" effect on man's morals than did the imposition of their sexual desires on white women." ²³ This passage argues that the African-American woman takes on the position of the unacceptable mother and the chaste white woman that of the acceptable mother, who does not violate the incest taboo. The African-American woman, then, assumes the position of whore that is equated with the breakdown of the incest taboo and/or the realm of the id. In the process of splitting the person of "mother" in the Oedipal drama, the Southern planter can satisfy his sexual desires for a maternal figure while maintaining the social order established by the incest taboo. The white woman can remain virginal.

Self-Representation

The question of the representation of African-American women is one of particular interest to Black politics. The Mammy is posited as a traitor, working in the white man's kitchen, and as an emasculator. This image simultaneously affronts the status of the African-American man while degrading the African-American woman. Two political considerations

arise from this history: the necessity to redefine both the presence of African-Americans in the United States and the notion of the feminine.

The role of the African-American woman in political struggle began to be discussed again in conjuction with the civil rights movement, symbolized by Rosa Parks, a domestic worker whose refusal to sit in the back of the bus provoked the 1955 Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott.

Throughout the history of the civil rights struggle, women had always played a crucial role. The political writings of Angela Davis, and works such as Betye Saar's The Liberation of Aunt Jemima (1972) and Elizabeth Catlett's Black Unity (1968, not in the exhibition) represent Black identity without employing gender hierarchy. All three women urge African-American women to take a stand of resistance next to their male counterparts, "to leave behind the shadowy realm of female passivity in order to assume her rightful place beside the insurgent male." 24 In The Liberation of Aunt Jemima, Aunt Jemima smiles while holding a broom and a rifle, thus replacing the facade of congenial satisfaction with resistance. Underneath the white baby, the symbolic fist of Black Power shoots up her apron. Saar reveals the political participation of Black women that goes unrecognized by the white community. Her Aunt Jemima breaks the monolithic hold of the Mammy stereotype. It is clear that Mammy does not accept her position of servitude: the smile will only give way to violent overthrow; the satisfaction in service is only a myth. The Liberation of Aunt Jemima exposes the ridiculousness of the Mammy figure. Angela Davis, a contemporary of Saar and Catlett, commented on the historical role of women in the civil rights movement:

In fact, it would appear that the intense levels of resistance historically maintained by black people and thus the historical function of the black Liberation Struggle as harbinger of change throughout the society are due in part to the greater *objective* equality between the black man and the black woman. ²⁵

Contemporary strategies by artists working with the image of African-American women recognize the paradoxes involved in representation. The works of Lorna Simpson and Carrrie Mae Weems do not



Betye Saar, The Liberation of Aunt Jemima, 1972

engage in a one-to-one correspondence between image and political effect. By manipulating the conventions of photography, their work undermines codes of traditional image making and calls representational form into question.

Since the 1970s, the critical investigation of photography challenges contemporary artists to use the medium effectively without subscribing either to its traditional aesthetic aspirations or to its traditional documentary restrictions. Expanded by critical analysis, photography now occupies a discursive terrain which can simultaneously incorporate documentary practice and narrative fiction. The evidence of fabrication within Weems' and Simpson's work subverts documentary forms and its claims to objective, authoritative truth without establishing another, alternative narrative of subjective, authorial truth.

Lorna Simpson's *C-ration 1991* (1991) brackets both photographic conventions as much as it exposes the mythical link between Black femininity and domestic service. It consists of an image of a white plate (left) and an African-American woman's shoulder (right) which can be read as contrived studio images in their clean, precise use of the frame and obvious control of lighting. The black body specifically denotes African-American women, but in the service economy of the 1990s it could metaphorically refer to the large immigrant populations that provide service-sector labor. By separating the image of the plate from the image of the body, Simpson avoids reiterating the commonplace image of the black body as servant. Instead, she makes the artificial and socially imposed nature of service apparent.

Weems' *Bride* (1989) in its mocking, ornate presentation, depicts the decorative facade of marriage and, with tape over the bride's mouth, its historical implications for women. The act of marriage becomes synonymous with the silencing of the bride. Through the white wedding dress, elaborate framing, beauty baskets, and studio style of the portrait, Weems refers to all the canonical signifiers of marriage: virginity, wealth, beauty, desirability, and tradition.

In their representational distribution through stereotypes such as the Mannny figure, these signifiers have systematically excluded African-



Lorna Simpson, C-ration 1991, 1991

American women. The work moves between a reading pertaining to perceptions of race to an interpretation of marriage itself. Weems reinforces the concept that marriage has traditionally isolated women and removed them from the public sphere.

Weems' Untitled (1990) seems analogous to the writings of Toni Morrison in its narrative qualities and reference to politics through a fictional, personal, internal narrative, rather than through an overt political statement. In its documentary style, the somber, murky quality of the images, and its narrative construction of a subjective account, the piece is similar to the Roy De Carava and Langston Hughes photography-text collaboration in The Sweet Flypaper of Life (1955): the narrative of a grandmother that weaves the specifics of her family through a general description of her community. Untitled is a specific story about an African-American woman and her relationship with an African-American man. Their quarrels reiterate situations common to the intimate experience of a broad audience. In this subtle scheme of fictive narration, the images and text subvert stereotypes. The piece presents an image of a self-sufficient woman. The man's anxiety over employment refers to the traditional portrayal of the Mannny as head of the household and the economic oppression of the Black male, but the narrative is still about their relationship and its dynamics.

Davis, Saar, and Catlett attempt to question the category of "woman" and redefine the stereotyped characteristics of the African-American woman. Images such as those of Carrie Mae Weems, which specifically move outside the discourse of stereotypes, make it possible for Black identity to escape the binary oppositions necessary to racist discourse. A fissure in the knowledge of the colonized is produced by evading those discourses that substantiate and maintain the colonizer. Homi Bhabha links racist discourse to a particular type of knowledge: "an 'other' knowledge—a knowledge that is arrested and fetishistic and circulates through colonial discourse as that limited form of otherness, that fixed form of difference, that I have called the stereotype." ²

Innate to stereotypes of African-Americans are gender roles formed within a sexist paradigm: Mammy's strength and independence are only negative in a sexist context. By unveiling the sexist structure of gender

Dirt & Domesticity





Carrie Mae Weems, Untitled, 1990

construction, the stereotype of African-Americans becomes ineffective. The hegemonic notion of manhood, of masculinity, is challenged by resisting dominant notions of femininity. Furthermore, in this redefinition of gender, Black politics can avoid "an assimilationist manner that set[s] out to show that Black people [are] really like White people." This challenge is necessary to Black political movements, because under the racist and sexist hierarchical order, masculinity and femininity are realized through dominance and submission. The women's movement faces a similar challenge of coalition building without relying on tokenism and relativism to structure its political agenda. The notions of "man/woman" and "Black" are irreversibly tied together by the historical precedence of stereotypes.



Notes

- 1. Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in Russell Ferguson et al., ed. Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures (Cambridge, Massachusetts:The MIT Press), 1990, p.82.
- 2. Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *The Black Scholar*, 3 (December, 1971), p.4.
- 3. Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress:* Woman's World in the Old South, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), p. 201.
- 4. Patricia Morton, "'My Ol' Black Mammy' in American Historiography," in *Southern Women*, Caroline Matheny Dillman, ed. (New York: Hemisphere Publishing Co., 1988), p.37.
- 5. Quoted in Mae C. King, "The Politics of Sexual Stereotypes, *The Black Scholar*, 4 (March-April, 1973), p.13.
 - 6. Ibid., p.38
- 7. Karen Sue Warren Jewell, "An Analysis of the Visual Development of a Stereotype: The Media's Portrayal of Maniny and Aunt Jemima as Symbols of Black Womanhood," Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio State University, Columbus, 1976, p.37.
 - 8. Ibid., p.30.
 - 9. Ibid., p.2.
- 10. Howell Raines, "Grady's Gift," The New York Times Magazine, December 1, 1991, cover.
- 11. Jewell, "An Analysis of the Visual Development of a Stereotype," p. 35

- 12. Clinton, The Plantation Mistress, p.203.
- 13. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1967), p.70.
- 14. Quoted in Barbara A. Sizemore, "Sexism and the Black Male," *The Black Scholar*, 4(March-April, 1973), p.3.
 - 15. Morton, "My Ol' Black Mammy," p.38.
- 16. Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role," p.4.
- 17. Ice Cube, "Turn Off the Radio," *Amerikkka's Most Wanted*, Priority Records, 1990.
- 18. King, "The Politics of Sexual Stereotypes," p.16.
- 19. Hazel V.Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.39.
- 20. Jewell, "An Analysis of the Visual Development of a Stereotype," p.40.
 - 21. Clinton, The Plantation Mistress, p.202.
- 22. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, The Poltites and Poetics of Transgression (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), p.159.
 - 23. Clinton, The Plantation Mistress, p 204
- 24. Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role," p.14
 - 25. Ibid , p 15
 - 26. Bhabha, "The Other Question," p.82
- 27. Cornel West, "The New Cultural Polities of Difference," in *Out There Marginalization and Contemporay Cultures*, p. 303.

There's No Place Like Home: Women and Domestic Labor

Cara Mertes

"Dirt and Domesticity: Constructions of the Feminine" seeks to examine more closely the relationship between women's lives and domesticity by tracing the history of meanings associated with gendered labor, the family, woman, and dirt. These concepts are linked in American culture and form deeply held values and expectations that must be negotiated throughout every woman's life. In this system, the home becomes a powerful metaphor; it is alternatively a site of disenfranchisement, abuse, and fulfillment with which women have historically been expected to identify. Just as men have traditionally been encouraged to "earn a good living," women are still expected to "keep house." Despite expansions in the opportunities available to some women, the situation remains essentially unchanged: even if a woman works outside the home, as about forty-five percent of adult women now do, if she is in a heterosexual relationship, she is still assumed to be, and usually is, the primary caregiver, as well as the person responsible for the housework.

"Dirt and Domesticity" proposes that there is nothing intrinsically feminine about the home and, more specifically, the labor performed in the home. The exhibition and catalogue also explore two crucial questions: why is the idea that there is something inescapably, essentially feminine about "the home" so powerful in American society? And how does culture function to reinforce stereotypes based on sexual difference?

Simone de Beauvoir's proposition in *The Second Sex* that women are largely "made" feminine through social interaction, and not simply born knowing how to "be" women, had an electrifying effect on the emerging American feminist movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Using de Beauvoir's insights, feminists developed the concept of "gender" to describe behavior which could be attributed to cultural training rather

than to biology, as had been previously theorized.² This meant that so-called feminine traits could be seen as historically and socially constructed rather than innate. Theories of gendered behavior also encompassed issues of class, race, and the operations of ideology, all of which had a direct impact on the association of women with the space and labor of the home. To better understand how these elements have resulted in divisions of labor that remain operative in today's society, it is necessary to examine the experience of industrialization in nineteenth-century America, focusing on its effect on family structures, social values, and realignment of women's social roles. It is here that the roots of current associations concerning women's work can be found.

The economic restructuring of America (see Table 1, p.60) into industrial capitalism was a profoundly complex and traumatic social experience, causing fundamental shifts in the cultural meanings associated with labor and the family.³ In the transformation from pre-capitalist, agrarian-based economies to industrial capitalism, certain "values," like male dominance and the biological superiority of the white race, continued to operate as fundamental organizing principles. Simultaneously, institutions such as government and the family adjusted to the combined (and often contradictory) pressure presented by the concept of individual rights, which had been built into government, and by the needs of business.

In *The Origin of the Family, Private Propery, and the State*, Frederick Engels saw the emerging working-class and middle-class family functioning within a capitalist economy as a site for the physical and ideological reproduction of the labor force. He identified their organizational traits as monogamous (mandatory for married women), patriarchal, and oppressive for both women and children. The family in this instance was also overwhelmingly white. Blacks and other peoples of color had extremely limited access to property ownership and wage-earning in the nineteenth century. The working-class family produced the goods and the profits required of industrial capitalism and became a primary market for its mass-produced goods. The middle-class family owned and/or managed production and was also a primary market for mass production. In

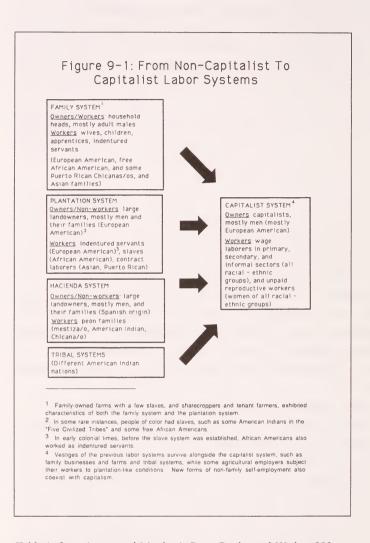


Table 1, from Amott and Matthaei, Race, Gender, and Work, p.293.

addition, industrialization shifted the activity of production from agrarian communities where production was home-based, centering it instead in new, mostly urban locations which expanded during the early to midnineteenth century as America's industrial infrastructure was built.

For nineteenth-century working-class and middle-class women, the urban life-style, combined with the changes in the kinds of labor needed to run the home, had tremendous consequences. Woman's evolving role as a consumer of goods was fast oustripping her role as a producer of goods, as the supplying of basic needs like material for clothing, soap, food, and candles was taken on by industry, mass-produced, and then sold back to the households. At the same time, men were being drawn fully into the labor market, where the day's work took place away from the home, and working-class and middle-class women were becoming increasingly responsible for keeping house. But within the capitalist economy, the domestic enterprise was a job that was not considered worthy of a salary. In a 1903 analysis of housework, feminist Charlotte Gilman described the classification of domestic work in this way:

The phrase "domestic work" does not apply to a special kind of work, but to a certain grade of work, a state of development through which all kinds [of work] pass. All industries were once "domestic," that is, were performed at home and in the interests of the family. All industries have since that remote period risen to higher stages, except one or two which have never left their primal stage.⁵

Gilman's recognition that the repetitious physical labor performed in the home was still "primal" and never effectively industrialized reveals a hierarchy in which domestic labor was the lowest, most undervalued form of work in American society. "Primal" work in fact defined the lives of the vast majority of American women.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, as the effects of social reorganization under capitalism became more entrenched, middle-class ideals of home, family, male and female began to change. The social was seen to be split into public and private activities and concerns, with men associated with the former and women with the latter. The "public"

included labor, business, politics, and the professions; the "private" included child-rearing and home maintenance. Middle-class and working-class women were socially validated in relation to an idea of the home, and it was considered a social stigma for women to be in the workplace, just as the notion of a house-husband was unimaginable.

The social validation of women exclusively in relation to the home has not been consistent, however. As Bettina Berch notes, early nineteenth-century attitudes toward women working outside the home were more flexible. It was working-class women, for instance, not men, who were the foundation of the industrial infrastructure in the early textile mills of the 1810s and 1820s. While an agricultural economy was still prevalent, white native-born women and children were the employees of choice for industry. Men, it was believed, needed to continue with the more valuable activity of farm work. The hugely profitable pre-Civil War textile industries were so exploitative of their female labor force that women organized some of the first labor unions, pioneering strike techniques such as turnouts and work stoppages to protest poor working conditions and demand improvements.6 Although the mills created opportunities for women to earn money and raise their and their family's income, they also established the patterns of business that traditionally hire women, children of color, and immigrants in piecework, sweatshop work, and other cottage industries. These industries continue to be among the lowest paid and most exploitative of occupations.

The mills illustrate an early instance where business initially recruited women to work by propagandizing about the benefits of women having their own income. They advertised their jobs as opportunities for young women to have the freer life-style that accompanied "earning your own way." It was not until the 1840s and 1850s, when industry finally replaced agriculture as the dominant economic structure, and a burgeoning immigrant population turned a labor shortage into labor surplus, that competition for jobs resulted in the systematic exclusion of women from the workplace. White men began to dominate the labor market, and working-class women in particular felt the pressure as their wage-earning options became more limited. For many white working-class women,

as well as women of color and immigrants, domestic work became their only alternative.

With the increase in competition for employment, American economic and political legislation complemented gender discrimination with an expansion and codification of previously established racist tenets, which functioned to exclude the overwhelming majority of free Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, and other people of color from education, employment, and access to economic advancement. Slaves were legally classified as property and as such were completely excluded from active participation in the economy, except insofar as they increased their owner's assets. This left the opportunities for advancement to white men of Northern European descent, a bias still in effect today. (In 1900, seventy-two percent of *all workers* were white men; by 1980, the figure was still as high as forty-eight percent.)

Working-class women were closed out of factory work, trade work, and craft work through a variety of tactics, including laws barring women's employment, lack of training opportunities, and male-only membership in unions. The logic of biological determinism which posited that women's first and only responsibility was to have and raise children was the most commonly used tactic to reinforce legal and social structures which prevented women from gaining economic opportunities.

Supported by the new belief that women had to maintain the household, marriage in the nineteenth century evolved into an even more firmly fixed system of property management, with women being the object of exchange between men (father to husband). While free women were not defined exclusively as property, as slave women were, free women had few legal rights within marriage, and were greatly devalued socially if for some reason they remained unmarried. Women and children then, as now, took the father/husband's name as their own and were expected to become completely reliant economically on the male head of the family.

Class divisions also began to solidify with the expansion of industrial capitalism, and a complex social hierarchy developed in order to more precisely define one's status. In this social order, the "cult of domesticity" became a mainstay. This was a potent ideology with profoundly sexist

and racist roots that accompanied the rise of capitalism, codifying social behavior and values in America during the mid- to late nineteenth century. In some ways it was an adaption of Southern antebellum social values regarding family organization and gender roles. These were reformulated within a post-Emancipation society, recasting the racism of an explicitly government-supported slave economy into an implicitly racist capitalist economy.

The ideology of the cult was a virulent combination of morality and economics, with one of the principal effects being the masculinization of certain aspects of the social and the feminization of others. The home was invested with a spiritual quality and the idealization of the domestic took on religious characteristics, transforming home management into a calling rather than a particular classification of labor. The home was to be a refuge from the tensions of wage labor; a place the "man of the house" could rest and be rejuvenated for tomorrow's day in the workplace, and children would learn their proper social roles. Emotional life had its place in the home, and, as Judith Williamson notes, the home also contained the very values that society must be seen to uphold, such as empathy, caring, and nurturance; values which are, in fact, incompatible with a capitalist economy. ⁸

This belief that "a woman's place is in the home" stood in sharp contrast to the pressing need for many working-class women to earn an income. However, the ideology of domesticity was so pervasive that toward the end of the nineteenth century, even working-class women were expected to stop working outside the home after marriage if they wanted to be considered respectable. Many were forced to do wage work at home, such as laundry or taking in boarders, in order to survive. (Though economic realities kept most working-class families from attaining middle-class status in one generation, the dream of becoming middle-class had profound effects on the construction of working-class lives.)

Middle-class women discovered the precariousness of their social circumstance, which combined a lack of job choices with total reliance on a male wage-earner, only when they became widowed, divorced, or otherwise did not fit into a social structure which assumed the existence of



The Byron Company, The Stevens Family Servants at Castle Point, 1895

a traditional, male-dominated family support system. Professions such as nursing and teaching, as extensions of duties typically performed by women in the home, became associated with women and provided some source of income for middle-class women who had to work.

Marital success and failure was judged by the wife's moral standing and her ability to keep house. The middle-class housewife was expected to maintain a good reputation, provide a proper education for the children, and be socially presentable. It was her duty to keep the home clean, both morally and physically. No stain should appear on her reputation or her household. In this way, the condition of the home became a marker of social significance that reflected on the male head of household. In a 1906 statement, American Federation of Labor leader Samuel Gompers expressed the prevailing sentiment of the day—that this was a perfectly natural, God-given arrangement:

I contend that the wife or mother, attending to the duties of the home, makes the greatest contribution to the support of the family....I entertain no doubt but that...the wife will, apart from performing her natural household duties, perform that work which is most pleasurable for her, contributing to the beautifying of her home and surroundings.

Gompers' statement connects woman's pleasure with home labor and beautification, an assumed link that veils the constructed quality of such an assertion.

Highly effective in creating and maintaining gendered identification, the cult of domesticity also functioned as part of the middle-class struggle to define and concretize the absolute differences between working-class and middle-class life-styles. Here begins in earnest the intolerance of poverty and the culturally sanctioned derision of "dirt" in its rapidly proliferating manifestations. Suddenly dirt was potentially to be found anywhere, and particularly in relation to the body of woman. Social status was closely aligned with one's relationship to dirt. Palmer states that "beginning at least in the late nineteenth century, the designation 'dirty' was regularly applied to women, to working-class men and women, and to women and men seen as racially different from the dominant group." ¹⁰

As the notion of dirt became aligned with woman and poverty, so too, sexuality, desire, and passion, all redolent with dirt, became markers of the feminine.

"Woman" signified that which was irrational, mysterious or threatening. In this increasingly repressive atmosphere, the far-ranging attempts to control women's mental and physical activities can be seen as the expressions of a society that valued organization and rationality to the exclusion of anything associated with the body, including bodily sights, sounds, and smells. Denial of the body was associated with being civilized. Freud saw the establishment of the civilized or socialized individual as a product of the Oedipus complex; part of the process whereby gendered identity is psychically structured within the bourgeois or middle-class family. These gendered identities are then reinforced by social institutions, like the family, the educational system, the law, and scientific research, and ultimately come to be accepted as natural, unchanging realities.

Resistance to naturalized concepts of gendered behavior can be found in feminist writings and activism from the early 1800s on. Women started social reform movements, wrote newspapers, published books, and held rallies attacking institutions and beliefs oppressive to women. As the links among women, reproduction, and the home were increasingly reiterated throughout the early part of this century, science became one of the most effective tools with which the dominant culture defined woman's place, even to the point of establishing schools beginning in the early 1900s to teach the "science" of proper home care to young women. Domestic work itself was studied, rationalized, and systematized, giving it the veneer of professionalism with none of the social or economic benefits. Anthropologist Margaret Mead was one who fought scientific fire with fire, questioning the "naturalness" of gendered labor. Regarding the value of maternal love, for instance, Mead stated unequivocally that the assertion that children need their mothers "is a new and subtle form of antifeminism in which men—under the guise of exalting the importance of matermty—are tying women more tightly to their children."11

By the second half of the nineteenth century, the concept of gendered labor had become a pillar of social organization. However, while the man's work of production was subject from the outset to legislation and government oversight, the woman's work was not. In the home, labor included everything from the labor of childbirth to the daily cleaning, feeding, teaching, and fixing required to keep a home functional. Because capitalism allowed for no systems of communal labor, such as state-run childcare centers and shared kitchens, home tasks were repeated ad infinitum for every individual household, creating an enormous consumer market for mass-produced goods. Simultaneously, a huge demand for domestic labor developed in part because the status of the middle-class woman and that of her family was defined by the very fact that she did not work for wages and did not do her own housework. Middle-class women hired other women to maintain their homes, so becoming domestic "managers." Palmer notes that "domestic success often depended on the exploitation of other women, denial of physicality, and limitation self-development controlling 'bad' impulses," 12 and it was in the internal structures of middle- and upper-class household labor practices that a microcosm of larger racist and sexist social patterns can be seen.

Different geographical regions had different servant/domestic populations. In the Northeast, the most demanding or demeaning physical work at first went to white immigrant women. Beginning in approximately 1900, however, and continuing until 1940, this work went to the Black women who migrated in large numbers to Northern cities. In the South, Black women continued to work for white families as much after Emancipation as before. In the Southwest, Mexican immigrants and Native Americans formed the service population. The West Coast had the only primarily male service population, comprised of Chinese men who had been imported or had immigrated in the second half of the nineteenth century. Work done within middle-class homes was assigned by the housewife, who ran the staff and, depending on the family's wealth, might do some of the lighter chores. The dirtier and more strenuous the work, the lower the status of the women who performed it.

The treatment of Black women in this society vividly illustrates the way in which dichotomous social values were assigned to women of different racial/ethnic backgrounds. It is particularly important to establish

the extent of the differences between the historical experiences of Black women and white women in the contexts of patriarchy and capitalism, since the legacy of slavery remains active in the construction of social hierarchies and cultural values.

The enslavement of Black women, as Hazel Carby notes, was a form of oppression more extensive than anything free white women could have experienced. In the nineteenth century, while middle-class women were identifying and struggling against the oppressive institution of marriage, Black women slaves were fighting to achieve status as human beings in the eyes of the law. As Carby observes, "free women in US white patriarchy were exchanged in a system that oppressed them [marriage], but white women *inherited* black women and men....In a racist patriarchy, white men's 'need' for racially pure offspring positioned free and unfree women in incompatible, asymmetrical symbolic and social spaces." ¹⁴ In such a system, Black women are seen as expendable, and white women are valued as priceless.

After Emancipation, Black women uniformly had no access to most jobs, and despite often intolerable circumstances, domestic service was for most the only alternative. From 1900 to 1940, between forty percent and sixty percent of adult Black women worked for wages, and forty to sixty percent of these women worked in domestic service. ¹⁵ Live-in domestic service, the most frequent occupation for Black women before World War II, placed Black women in the homes of middle-class, primarily white families with great frequency. Symbolically and literally, they were placed oppositionally to white women within a patriarchal set of values, each illuminating and reinforcing the difference of the other and simultaneously becoming integral to the representation of the other.

A set of polarities regarding Black women and their mistresses had developed during slavery, and they continued to operate in the context of domestic work; black/white, sexual/frigid, animal/human, loose/moral, available/claimed, dirty/clean, polarities that psychically bound Black women to their white employers. In this society, as Phyllis Palmer shows, "working-class women and women of color have been the repositories for images of sexuality and moral inferiority; they have been depicted as legit-



James C. Campbell, 100,000th Job Seeker, Grant's Employment Agency, c. 1940

imate sexual outlets for men, as loose women who are also so powerless that they pose no threat to men's authority or autonomy; their presence enabled good women to be missionaries for social purity, and they performed the labor that enabled good women to appear dainty and clean." ¹⁶ The "good" woman could be responsible for the disappearance of dirt in the home, but never have to touch it herself. The invisible labor of housework could only be done by "invisible" women of color. Thus, women of color, initially as slaves, and then employed as domestics in white middle-class households, not only physically keep the home clean, but also contained the psychological dirt as well.

Exploitation of domestic workers ranged from exceptionally low wages or no wages at all, to emotional and physical exploitation, including sexual abuse and the constant demand for subservient behavior. Since domestic workers could be "treated like dirt," their presence continually reaffirmed the employers' higher status and qualitative superiority.

The low social status of domestic workers symbolizes the almost total cultural devaluation of women's labor both inside and outside the

home. The association of women with unpaid home work has also historically informed the chronically low salaries of women at all levels of employment in relation to comparable male workers. Because women and people of color are seen as sources of alternate labor, greater opportunities for these populations have historically occurred only during times of national crisis.

For this reason, World Wars I and II were watersheds for women in terms of redefining their economic roles in society. World War I allowed white women into office and factory work en masse for the first time and loosened the strict laws that made it illegal for married women to work at certain jobs. Though American women gained the right to vote in 1919, and worked for the passage of other progressive legislation in the 1920s, by the 1930s women were once again being encouraged through advertising and other media to "look good" and concentrate on caring for their husbands and children, instead of advancing their own education and careers outside the home. The Depression, however, made it more difficult for middle-class women to afford domestic help. (By this time, Black women formed the largest population of domestics and were the hardest hit by the dwindling need for domestic workers.) Palmer notes that the years "from 1920 to 1945 may be viewed as a transitional period during which middle-class homes changed from being directed by a lady-housewife to being served by the wife....Without a servant to emphasize her superiority, this wife found her role considerably less tolerable." 17 The new image of the housewife consolidated the roles of servant and mistress, and a wide range of affordable appliances meant to "modernize" the home and take the place of domestic help were being aggressively marketed.

World War II accelerated the movement of middle-class white women into office work and opened opportunities for Black and other women of color in secretarial, factory, and sevice positions. The massive shortage of male labor from 1939 to 1945 gave women the opportunity to work outside the home in great numbers for an extended period of time. Though the dominant ideology of the 1950s attempted to place women squarely in the kitchen again, the changes that had occurred during World War II revealed the extent to which women had been denied active eco-

nomic participation and fueled the development of the American feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

Domestic service as it had been traditionally defined has been declining since the 1930s. Much of this is due to the expansion of the service industry sector, which includes industrialized forms of work previously done in the home. Jobs such as fast food preparation, nursing, cleaning and laundry now form the low end of the labor market ¹⁸, and, as in the past, the work is done primarily by immigrants and native-born women of color. These women are also the primary source for the domestic work that continues today (see Table 2).¹⁹

The pattern of women's struggles over two centuries for economic and legal parity has exposed the need to restructure society's interlocking system of values and institutions that simultaneously mask and reaffirm inequitable social relations, or what bell hooks has called a "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy." ²⁰ Close examination of the current legal and economic status of women, people of color, and other oppressed groups in America only confirms this description.

Historical analysis reveals the links between the changing individual circumstances of women from different racial/ethnic and class backgrounds and the larger social agenda dictated by the needs of a shifting economy. Even over the last thirty years, changes in the definitions of the family and work in relation to women have been substantial. For example, in 1960, seventy percent of all households were married-couple families; by 1990, the figure was about fifty percent, with only about twenty-seven percent being the traditional "nuclear" family of two parents and children. The number of traditional families continues to decline, as that of single parent, female-headed households rises, most rapidly among Hispanics and African-Americans.²¹ This is a situation which reflects both economic pressures and the development of different value structures whereby women are choosing to have and raise children alone or with other women. The organization and function of the family, and of work, in the daily lives of women remains critically contested social terrain on which the struggle for parity will continue.

Table 10-3

Share of Employed Women Working in Private Household Service

	1900	1930	1960	1980
African American	43.5	53.5	39.3	5.0
European American	29.8	12.0	4.4	0.8
American Indian	13.4	22.5	16.8	1.4
Chinese American	35.6	12.1	1.7	0.8
Japanese American	28.6	29.9	8.2	1.4
Filipina American	n.a.	34.4	3.7	0.9
Chicana	n.a.	33.1	115	2.4
U.S. Puerto Rican	n.a.	n.a.	1.2	0.7
Island Puerto Rican	78.4	27.5	13.7	1.4

Table 2, from Amott and Matthaei, Race, Gender, and Work, p.325.

Notes

- 1. Teresa Amott and Julie Matthaeï, Race, Gender, and Work: A Multi-Cultural Economic History of Women in the United States (Montreal and New York, Black Rose Books, 1991), p.316.
- 2. Donna J. Haraway, Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Woman (New York, Routledge, 1991), p.131.
- The table reproduced is taken from Amott and Matthaer, Race, Gender and Work, Table 9-1, p.293.
- 4. Frederick Engels, The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State [New York: International Publishers, 1972), pp.71, 126.
- 5. Quoted in Angela Y. Davis, Women, Race and Class (New York: Random House, 1981), p.230
- 6. Bettina Berch, The Endless Day: The Political Economy of Women and Work (New York) Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), pp 31–33.
- 7. Amott and Matthaei, Race, Gender, and Work, p. 297.
- 8. Judith Wilhamson, "Woman Is an Island," in Tania Modleski, ed., Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture [Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986], p. 106.

- 9. Quoted in Berch, The Endless Day, p.41
- 10. Phyllis Palmer, Domesticity and Dirt: Houseurives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920-1945 (Philadelphia:Temple University Press, 1989), p.18.
- Quoted in Ann Oakley, Woman's Work: The Housewife Past and Present (New York! Vintage Books, 1976), p. 209.
 - 12. Palmer, Domesticity and Dirt, p. 141.
- 13. Amott and Matthaei, Race, Gender and Work, p. 321.
- 14. Quoted in Haraway, Simians, Cyborgs, and Women, p.145.
- Amott and Matthaer, Race, Gender and Work, p.324.
 - 16. Palmer Domestuty and Dirt. p. 144
 - 17_Ibid., p.13
- 18. Amott and Matthaei, Race, Gender and Work, p. 324.
- 19 Ibid., p 325, Table 10-3, for the table reproduced
- 20. bell hooks, Media Network Conference. New York City, December 1991
- 21. Amott and Matt. act, Race, Gender and Work p. 310.

Video Program Notes

Cara Mertes

The videos and films accompanying "Dirt and Domesticity: Constructions of the Feminine" draw on cultural definitions of women, labor, dirt, and the home through performance, the use of familiar and unfamiliar histories, humor, and a critical sensibility that challenges viewers to rethink the relationship between individual lives and larger social structures. The work spans generations as well as styles, from Martha Rosler's 1975 blackand-white video performance classic *Semiotics of the Kitchen* to Zeinabu irene Davis' 1991 rap video *A Period Piece* to what video-maker Laura Kipnis calls a "postmodern-experimental-revisionist bio-pic" in describing her 1991 *Marx: The Video* (*A Politics of Revolting Bodies*)."

For each producer, the physical location of the struggle over the meaning of the feminine is central to the work. Whether it is in the factory, the wedding aisle, the kitchen, or the bathroom, witnesses both real and imaginary speak about the dynamics of power in a society in which the *image* of woman is ubiquitous while real women are rendered invisible politically, socially, and economically.

In Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, the suburban kitchen metaphorically becomes a battleground in which Rosler deploys utensils as weapons in her version of Every (suburban) woman's war-on-the-home-front. Moving swiftly through the alphabet of pots, pans, and silverware, Rosler's gestures barely contain a violence which speaks volumes about the frustration of the housewife's own containment in the home.

For Zeinabu irene Davis, rap video provides the form to look critically at the message of an advertising culture that sells the idea of feminine protection. In *A Period Piece*, Davis treats the stigma attached to menstruation and stains by inventing her own approach to self-confidence, an approach which doesn't include listening to advertising claims "that keep you fresh."





Left: Martha Rosler, Semiotics of the Kitchen, 1975 Right: Laura Kipnis, Marx: The Video, 1990

In *June Brides* (1987), filmmaker Cathy Cook flips the middle-class stereotype of the church wedding on its head, mixing animation and performance to create a funny and poignant critique of marriage rituals. For Cook, the "big day" serves as a platform to expose the foundations of the institution of marriage in compulsory heterosexism and the possibility of women's entrapment within marriage.

Stanley Nelson's focus on Black women who worked as domestics between 1900 and 1940 is a fascinating and important chronicle of the pivotal nexus of gender, class, and race for poor Black women who migrated from the South to Northern industrial cities in hopes of a better life. What they found was an endemic racism that took on new forms, forcing large numbers of Black women to work as domestics throughout their lives, despite the low pay and unending demands on their time and labor.

Director/producer Lorraine Gray, with Lyn Goldfarb and Anne Bohlen, shows another view of labor during the early 1900s. In *With Babies and Banners* (1984), members of the Women's Emergency Brigade speak eloquently about their involvement in the labor movement of the 1930s and the experience of being working-class women who, as they are increasingly exploited by management, become activists in the labor movement.

Laura Kipnis picks up the threads of exploitation and economics in *Marx: The Video*. For Kipnis, the body of Marx, the body politic, and the female body are coincident in their manifestations of revolution, whether physical (as in Marx's carbuncles) or sociopolitical (women's movements or strikes). Using a text based on Marx's letters to Engels as her structure, Kipnis mingles Marx with MTV to create a new kind of historical documentary, one adapted to the video age.

Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth. A dot [•] indicates that the photograph exhibited is a copy print provided by the institution credited.

Eve Arnold

(b.1913)

Untitled, 1953
 Black-and-white photograph, 14 x 11
 Magnum, New York

Artist & Homeless Collaborative and Guerilla Girls

Untitled, 1992
3 offset posters, 22 x 17
each; 2 portfolio books,
17 x 15 each
Collection of the artists

Bill Brandt

(1904-1983)

Parlormaid and Underparlormaid Ready to Serve Dinner, 1933

Black-and-white photograph, 24 1/8 x 20 5/8

The Museum of Modern

Art, New York; Purchase

Parlomaid Drawing Bath Before Dinner, 1937 Black-and-white photograph, 14 x 12 The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Purchase

Drawing Room at
Mayfair, 1938
Black-and-white photograph, 17 1/8 x 14 1/2
The Museum of Modern
Art, New York; Purchase

Brown Brothers

Employment Agencies for Servants in a New York, N.Y.
Tenement District, c. 1900
Black-and-white photograph, 10 x 8
Brown Brothers, Sterling,
Pennsylvania

The Byron Company

- The Stevens Family Servants at Castle Point, 1895
 Black-and-white photograph, 8 x 10
 Museum of the City of New York; The Byron
 Collection
- Dinner Party at Sherry's, 1902
 Black-and-white photograph, 8 x 10
 Museum of the City of New York; The Byron Collection
- Bridesmaids' Dinner, 1905
 Black-and-white photograph, 8 x 10
 Museum of the City of New York; The Byron Collection

James C. Campbell (b.1914)

• 100,000 th Job Seeker, Grant's Employment Agency, c. 1940 Black-and-white photograph, 8 x 10 The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

Mary Ellen Carroll

(b.1961)

The Hand of Fatima, 1989 Black-and-white photographs, typeset texts, 45 x 144 x 3 Collection of the artist

Keep Me Modest, 1989 Coal and wool blankets, 36 x 13 x 13 Collection of the artist

Myrel Chernick

(b.1952) She Was, She Wasn't, 1991 2 slide projectors, timing mechanism, projected 35mm slides Collection of the artist

Judy Dater

(b.1941)

Ms. Clingfree, 1982

Color photograph, 24 x 20

University of Maryland,

Baltimore County;

Photography Collections

Dana Duff

(b.1955)
Selections from
Odor di Femina, 1989
Various substances and
objects in fired-glass bowls
on a square table: bowls
7 x 12 1/2 diameter;
table, 42 x 42 x 42
Collection of the artist;
courtesy Max Protetch
Gallery, New York

Toby Lee Greenberg

(b.1961)

Accept This Fact, 1987

Type-C print, 20 x 16

Collection of the artist

Having a Female Body, 1987 Type-C print, 20 x 16 Collection of the artist

Here's Just What You Have Been Waiting For, 1987 Type-C print, 20 x 16 Collection of the artist

I Just Finished Cleaning, 1987 Type-C print, 20 x 16 Collection of the artist

I Wouldn't Tell You, 1987 Type-C print, 20 x 16 Collection of the artist

Make Portions Large, 1987 Type-C print, 20 x 16 Collection of the artist

Danielle Gustafson (b.1963) Selections from *Domestic Relations*, 1989 (recreated 1992) Black-and-white photographs and texts: 35 panels, 16 x 20; 16 panels, 11 x 14 Collection of the artist

Ann Hamilton

(b.1956) still life, 1988 Table, chair, 800 men's white shirts, folded, starched, singed, and gilded, approximately 64 x 69 x 42 The Arthur and Carol Goldberg Collection

William Davis Hassler (1877-1921)

 Promotional Photograph for the United Electrical Company Showing Miss M. Cleaning Parlor Floor, c. 1914 Black-and-white photograph, 10 x 8 The New-York Historical Society

Lewis Hine

(1874-1940)

- Scrublady, N.Y., 1920
 Black-and-white photograph, 10 x 8
 International Museum of Photography at George
 Eastman House, Rochester, New York
- The Homemaker Deserves Recognition as One of Our Workers, c. 1925 Black-and-white photograph, 10 x 8 International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester, New York

Dorothea Lange (1895-1965)

 Drought Refugees Hoping for Cotton Work, Blythe, California, 1936 Black-and-white photograph, 10 x 8

graph, 10 x 8 The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California, 1936 Black-and-white photograph, 12 1/2 x 9 7/8 The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Purchase Migrant Mother Series, Nipomo, California, 1936
 3 black-and-white photographs, 8 x 10 each
 The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Gordon Parks (b.1912)

Washington, D.C., 1942
 Black-and-white photograph, 10 x 8
 The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Martha Rosler

(b.1945)
A budding gonnnet,
January-April 1974
12 postcards,
3 1/2 x 5 1/2 each
Collection of the artist

McTowersMaid,
September-December 1974
15 postcards,
3 1/2 x 5 1/2 each
Collection of the artist

Tijnana Maid, October 1975-February 1976 12 postcards, 4 1/2 x 6 each Collection of the artist

A New-Found Career, November 1976-April 1977 12 postcards, 4 1/2 x 6 each Collection of the artist

Betye Saar

(b.1926)
The Liberation of Aunt
Jemima, 1972
Mixed media, 11 3/4 x
8 x 2 3/4
University Art
Museum/Pacific Film
Archive, University
of California at Berkeley;
Purchased with the aid of
funds from the National
Endowment for the Arts

Imitation of Life, 1975 Mixed media, 8 1/4 x 7 x 4 Collection of the artist

Andres Serrano

(b.1950)

Red River #3, 1989

Cibachrome print, 60 x 40

Collection of Harry Lunn, Jr.;

courtesy Stux Gallery,

New York

Cindy Sherman

(b.1954)
Untitled Film Still #20, 1978
Black-and-white photograph, 10 x 8
Collection of the artist;
courtesy Metro Pictures,
New York

Untitled Film Still #35, 1979 Black-and-white photograph, 10 x 8 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Barbara and Eugene Schwartz 88,50.4 Untitled Film Still #65, 1980 Black-and-white photograph, 10 x 8 Collection of Samuel and Ronnie Heyman

Untitled #237, 1987–91 Color photograph, 93 11/16 x 49 3/16 Collection of the artist; courtesy Metro Pictures, New York

Vaughn Sills

(b.1946) Selections from *A Family I* Know in Georgia, 1979-89

Lois and Tina, 1979 Black-and-white photograph, 20 x 16 Collection of the artist

Tina, 1981 Black-and-white photograph, 20 x 16 Collection of the artist

Tina, 7 Months Pregnant, 1988 Black-and-white photograph, 16 x 20 Collection of the artist

Mary and Justin, 1989 Black-and-white photograph, 16 x 20 Collection of the artist

Dara Silverman

(b.1960) Story #1, 1991 Black-and-white photographs, electric typewriter, and table, 90 x 112 x 40 overall P.P.O.W, New York

Lorna Simpson

(b.1960)
C-ration 1991, 1991
Black-and-white photograph, 25 5/8 x 47 3/4
Collection of the artist; courtesy Artists Space,
New York

Charles J. Van Schaick (1852-1946)

Seven Maids, Black River
Falls Wisconsin, c. 1890
Black-and-white photograph, 8 x 10
The State Historical Society
of Wisconsin, Madison;
Van Schaick Collection

Carrie Mae Weems

(b.1953) Bride, 1989 Black-and-white framed photograph, wicker baskets, artificial flowers, 25 1/2 x 21 1/2 P.P.O.W, New York

Untitled, from the series Untitled, 1990 3 black-and-white photographs, 28 1/4 x 28 1/4 each; 13 text panels, 11 x 11 each P.P.O.W, New York

Pat Ward Williams

(b.1948)

Ghosts That Smell Like
Combread, 1987

Vandyke and cyanotype
photographs m window
frame, stones, broken cup,
69 x 42 x 42

Collection of the artist

Marion Post Wolcott (1910-1990)

- Domestic Servants Waiting for Street Car on Way to Work Early into the Morning, Mitchell Street, Atlanta, Georgia, May 1939, 1939 Black-and-white photograph, 10 x 8 The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library
- Colored Maids with White Child in Stroller Visiting Together on Street Corner, Gibson, Misssissippi, 1940 Black-and-white photograph, 8 x 10
 The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

Lynne Yamamoto

(b.1961)
Ten in One Hour, 1992
Wood, grated soap, artificial hair, and lightbulb,
156 x 21 1/2 x 36 overall
Collection of the artist

Unidentified artists

- Girls Instructed in Pastrymaking at Colored Honsehold Training School, c. 1935
 Black-and-white photograph, 8 x 10
 The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library
- Directing Table-Setting
 Waitress, Capt. of Waitresses
 and Dining Room Supervisor,
 c.1937
 Black-and-white photograph, 8 x 10
 The Schomburg Center for
 Research in Black Culture,
 The New York Public
 Library

Archival material

6 issues of *Life* November 15, 1937; December 4, 1944; *June* 16, 1947; January 4, 1954; May 29, 1964; May 7, 1971

Videotapes in the Exhibition

Cathy Cook

(b.1955)
June Brides, 1987
Videotape transfer from film, color, sound,
10 minutes
Collection of the artist

Zeinabu irene Davis

(b.1961)
A Period Piece, 1991
Videotape, color, sound,
4 minutes
Women Make Movies,
Inc., New York

Lorraine Gray

(b.1953) with Ann Bohlen and Lyn Goldfarb With Babies and Banners, 1984 Videotape, color, sound, 45 minutes New Day Filnis, New York

Laura Kipnis

(b.1956)
Marx: The Video (A Politics of Revolting Bodies), 1990
Videotape, color, sound, 27 minutes
Electronic Arts Internux, Inc., New York

Stanley Nelson

(b.1951)
Freedom Bags, 1990
Videotape, color, sound,
35 minutes
Collection of the artist

Martha Rosler

(b.1945) Semiotics of the Kitchen, 1975 Videotape, color, sound, 8 minutes Electronic Arts Internax, New York

Photograph credits
Myrel Chemick (Chemick),
Dina Ciranlo (Simpson),
James Dee (Hamilton),
© 1987 Toby Lee Greenberg
(Greenberg), Adam Reich
(Weems), Pat Word Williams
(Word Williams)



FIRST OF ALL, WHEN YOUR NEIGHBOR OR FRIEND TELLS YOU SHE HAS EVERYHING OOME.... DON'T YOU BELIEVE IT! SHE HASN'T. NO WOMAN EVER OOES. AND WON'T EVEN WHEN SHE IS SIX FEET UNDER. (THAT "SIX-FEET-UNDER" MEANS OIRT!)

Toby Lee Greenberg, Accept This Fact, 1987

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